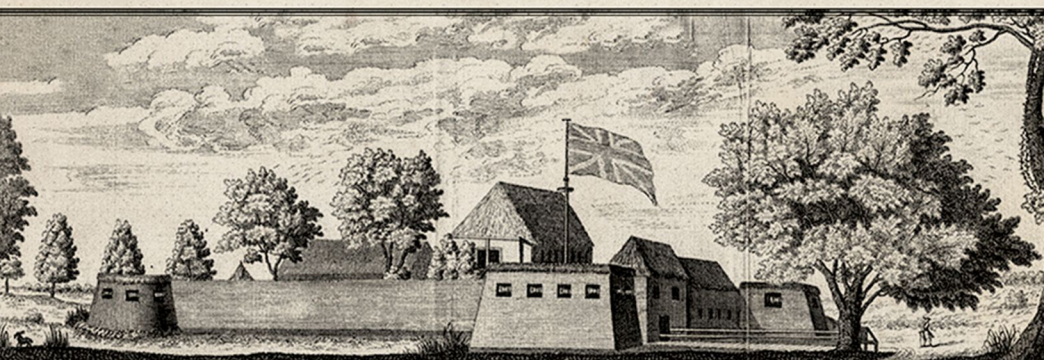




ABSON & COMPANY



SLAVE TRADERS *in* EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WEST AFRICA



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*Slave Traders in Eighteenth-Century
West Africa*



HURST & COMPANY, LONDON

First published in the United Kingdom in 2018 by
C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd.,
41 Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3PL
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Printed in India

Distributed in the United States, Canada and Latin America by
Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016,
United States of America.

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A Cataloguing-in-Publication data record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781849049627

This book is printed using paper from registered sustainable
and managed sources.

www.hurstpublishers.com

*In fond memory of Arthur S. Hoffman, an outstanding foreign service officer of
the bygone US Information Agency, as well as a writer and university lecturer,
and a faithful friend of half a century.*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In May 2001 I wrote to Art Hoffman, the subject of my dedication, who had encouraged my writing career in precolonial West African history. Art had suggested I also try fiction. I questioned whether I had the necessary imagination or skill, but admitted that I was thinking of novelizing the unusual life of an English official who had served perhaps a record number of years on the Slave Coast.

The official was Lionel Abson, who headed the English fort at the major slaving port of Ouidah in the kingdom of Dahomey from 1770 to his death in 1803. He was remarkable for surviving so long on a disease-ridden coast that ravaged Europeans, and also for gradually adapting to the local culture. Even after his death, his story was absorbing, given the fate of his biracial daughter Sally.

I had become aware of Abson in the mid-1990s through research for a book on the elite women warriors of Dahomey and a visit to that land, including Ouidah and Abomey. But years went by before I could find time to start the project. When I did, I realized very soon that the Abson tale could best be told, by me at least, not as fiction but as documented history, plus educated guesses where facts were missing or imprecise.

Finally, I decided to add, in a long Chapter 9, mini-biographies of seven European men who were also stationed on the West African coast in the eighteenth century, and a story of African women known as Signares, who married Europeans in Senegal, took part in the local slave trade, and prospered.

Many people helped me along the way. They included two professional researchers, Betty Thomson and Sarah Minney, who augmented

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

my own time spent at the United Kingdom's National Archives in Kew; Élisabeth Ortunio and Valérie Ammirati of the municipal library of Nice; Frédéric Gilly, of the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer of Aix-en-Provence; Joan Adams, Phil Edwards, Ron Spensley and Gail Woodhead, archivists of the Darfield–Barnsley area of South Yorkshire, England; David Henige, Michel R. Doortmont, Adam Jones, Jeff and Alessandra Easum; Ted Jones; Thor Smith; Dana Sardet; Christian Avon; Monique Picard; Matthew Lubin; Phil Cohan; Tania Buckrell Pos; Annelies Speksnijder; Christian Avon, my daughters Jamie Lovdal and Jennifer Alpern, and not least my wife Frances.

Among my most useful written sources were books by Robin Law and I.A. Akinjogbin, Frank Cass reprints of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works by British visitors to West Africa, and old publications made available online by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's Gallica programme. The last-mentioned includes not only scarce French works but, for example, the classic original edition of Richard F. Burton's *A mission to Gelele, king of Dahome*.

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A European's chances of surviving 36 years on the West African coast during the eighteenth century were infinitesimal. It was truly "the White Man's Grave", as it came to be called in the following century. The death rate was, in fact, far higher among them than among the slaves they shipped across the Atlantic. The latter rate was about 14.5 per cent, according to the latest statistics for the infamous Middle Passage,¹ though of course the reverse was true as regards total deaths because the number of slaves dwarfed the number of Europeans involved.

One white man² who beat all the odds was Lionel Abson, who lived at Ouidah on the Slave Coast (the ocean-side fringe of what are now southeastern-most Ghana, Togo, Benin and southwestern-most Nigeria) from 1767 to his death in 1803, and headed the English fort there from 1770 onward. In all that time, there is no evidence he ever returned to England.

Abson was probably aware of the mortal peril on his arrival, when he took the post of "factor", or trader, but it assuredly hit home three years later when his immediate predecessor as fort chief died six weeks after he reached Ouidah.

Oddly, the first person to publicize the phrase "White Man's Grave" was sceptical. F. Harrison Rankin, author of *The White Man's Grave: A Visit to Sierra Leone, in 1834*, wrote that on approaching Sierra Leone by ship "we believed the usual stories ... It is deemed a land of miasma, contagion, and death. It bears the terrific and poetic title of the 'White Man's Grave'."³ Rankin contended that such stories were exaggerated. They weren't.

Sierra Leone itself provided overwhelming proof. In the first year of English settlement there in the late 1780s, 46 per cent of the colonists died. A second effort in 1792–3 cost the lives of 49 per cent, and 10 per cent of the survivors died the following year. Of the 1,612 civilians and military personnel sent to Sierra Leone in 1821–6, 56.5 per cent died. Three English governors died in three years, 1826–8.⁴ Even an American Africanist who in 1974 claimed figures for British slave-trade deaths in West Africa were exaggerated accepted a mean annual rate for troops in Sierra Leone of 353 per thousand.⁵

The rest of the West African coast was just as deadly for Europeans. Between 1695 and 1722, an estimated one man in three in English service died in the first four months in Africa, and more than three in five in the first year. Of every ten who went to Africa from 1684 to 1732, six may have died in the first year, and two more from the second to seventh years.⁶ The Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, which ran all the English forts in the second half of the eighteenth century, sent out 1,080 persons from 1751 to 1788, and 653 of them died, 333 during the first year.⁷ In 1769, out of 48 British soldiers who arrived at Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast in February, 40 had died of illness by the end of May.⁸

Of 68 governors of Danish establishments on the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) from 1698 to 1850, 40 are said to have died at their post, a toll of 59 per cent.⁹ Of 90 persons sent from Denmark to the West Coast as officials in the period after 1820, 53 died, 33 of them in their first year, and 9 survivors died soon after their departure.¹⁰

For some as yet unknown and possibly questionable reason, Dutch death rates were lower than others but still substantial for mostly young European men. Between 1719 and 1760, an average of a bit less than one in five European employees of the Dutch West India Company died annually on the Gold Coast. But in 13 of those years the rate topped 20 per cent (and in six the rate was unavailable).¹¹ Oddly, from 1638 to 1852, about half of Dutch directors-general, all based in St George d'Elmina Castle on the Gold Coast, died in office though they lived more comfortably than the rank and file, and were often chosen from Company staffers who had survived the first and much the deadliest year for newcomers on the coast. They averaged only two years and seven months each.¹²

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Ouidah (known to anglophones as Whydah) was not spared. The Huguenot trader and author Jean Barbot, who visited the town in 1682, wrote that “you find hardly any [European] man coming there who does not die after a certain time [from swamp ‘vapours’], or ... [later from] flux of blood from the liver, or of raging colics”.¹³

English slave-ship captain Thomas Phillips, who spent two months at the English fort in 1694, said that “the white men the African company [the Royal African Company] send there, seldom [return] to tell their tale”. He noted that the fort, named William’s Fort after King William III (1689–1702), contained “a place where they bury their dead white men, call’d, very improperly, the hog-yard”.¹⁴ An English ship landed 53 passengers at Ouidah in 1721. Thirty-seven died in the first four months, and four during the rest of the first year, making a total loss of 77.3 per cent.¹⁵ One version of an old (and exaggerated) popular ditty about British seamen who visited the Slave Coast went:

Beware and take care
Of the Bight of Benin;
For one that comes out,
There are forty go in.¹⁶

Why the colossal death rate? The principal causes were two mosquito-borne diseases, malaria and yellow fever. The late American Africanist Philip D. Curtin, whose research focused for a time on the White Man’s Grave, observed that in West Africa “there is no escape” from infective mosquito bites.¹⁷

The prevalent form of malaria there is *Plasmodium falciparum*, one of the deadliest varieties, and it is transmitted by two mosquitoes, *Anopheles gambiae* and *A. funestus*. To this day the disease claims the lives of extremely high numbers of West African children under the age of five. The survivors are somewhat immune, helped to a degree by a sickle-cell blood trait inherited by many West Africans. Infant mortality among blacks was mimicked in slave-trade days by adult mortality among whites.

The mosquito that transmitted yellow fever was *Aedes aegypti*. The disease killed victims in five to seven days, but if they survived they were immune for life.

Dysentery, known as “the flux”, was another major killer of whites. With one exception, Europeans seem to have been spared a number of

other ailments endemic to West Africa, including sleeping sickness, elephantiasis, leprosy, schistosomiasis and yaws. The exception was Guinea worm, which reportedly was affecting whites, doubtless to their revulsion, by the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹⁸

Doctors were available to treat ill Europeans, but they didn't always know what they were doing. Two of their remedies for what were called "the fevers" actually made matters worse. One was bleeding from a cut vein. Since anaemia commonly accompanies malaria, victims needed all the blood they had. The other supposed remedy was calomel, a natural salt mixed with mercury and chlorine. Malaria seriously dehydrates, and calomel is a strong purgative that would dehydrate even more. "These two treatments in combination," Curtin tells us, "in their more extreme forms, might well be enough to kill a healthy person."¹⁹

Another problem was that doctors (then called surgeons) willing to go to West Africa in the eighteenth century were not of high quality. One stationed on the Gold Coast in 1778 was described by the British governor as "a good kind of fellow enough, but like most of that profession who come out here I believe he is not sufficiently conversant in his business".²⁰ An effort was made in 1790 to attract better men by raising surgeons' salary from £100 to £150 a year—the wage paid Abson throughout his 33 years as fort chief—but the very first beneficiary was a disaster. He was found "by no means competent to his station, either from a wrong practice with his patients, or in ignorance of his profession; the number of officers and soldiers who have died under his care will testify that one or other is the case".²¹

Actually, an effective medication for malaria reached Europe in the seventeenth century: powdered cinchona tree bark from South America. Unfortunately, it was useful only against malaria, which could not yet be distinguished from other fevers. When prominent physicians reported total failures of the drug, it would go out of fashion. It was not until the 1840s that quinine, an alkaloid compound from cinchona bark, went into general use.

That decade began with a familiar story. A British expedition up the Niger River in 1841–2 cost the lives of 55 of the 159 participants. However, two doctors who tested quinine on the voyage were very favourably impressed, and their reports led the Royal Navy to adopt it.

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In 1848 the British Army's medical director advised the governors of West African posts to use quinine, and the word spread to other Europeans. Around the same time bleeding and calomel were losing favour as treatments. The turning point came in 1854 when another British expedition up the Niger and Benue rivers returned to the coast without suffering a single fatality.²²

Why did Europeans take such great risks in West Africa before the mid-nineteenth century? Kenneth Gordon Davies, a student of the English slave trade, thinks recruiters kept the rank and file of volunteers in the dark about the horrendous death rate they faced. Wages, he notes, were "marginally better than at home ... and in Africa a man could be sure of continuous employment as long as he wanted it." Davies is sure officers "had a better idea of what they were letting themselves in for ... [but] gambled with their lives in a version of Russian roulette in which more chambers were loaded than empty". For the most part, they, too, "died early and died poor".²³

* * *

Almost unique longevity was the most notable accomplishment distinguishing Lionel Abson from his peers, but not the only one. His rise to the position of chief of the Ouidah fort was unusually fast, an exception to a general rule of promotion by seniority at English forts in West Africa.²⁴ Only three years after his arrival in 1767, he took charge. This suggests that his education or previous work experience, about which we know nothing, may have given him a leg up. The fact that he was already in his thirties may also have carried weight.

Abson became fluent in the local language—that of the Fon, the main ethnic group of Dahomey, in his case—a rare achievement among Europeans stationed on the West African coast.²⁵ A major book on Britain's African forts even ventured, wrongly but confirming its rarity, that "No European before the nineteenth century is known to have spoken an African language".²⁶ Abson seems to have acquired a working knowledge of French and Portuguese as well since he often conversed with fort officials, traders and ship captains from those two nations, and he never suggests in his writings that he had any problem communicating with them. One of his routine official expenses was for a trimonthly dinner with his French and Portuguese counterparts rotat-

ing monthly between the three forts and costing the equivalent of 30,000 cowrie shells, the local currency.²⁷ One French counterpart, Pierre-Simon Gourg, implied that Abson spoke French by contrasting him with a Portuguese fort chief who spoke not a word of it.²⁸ English was not, of course, the global lingua franca it is today.

Despite Abson's lack of interest in home leave, he was always hungry for news from England, especially about European affairs. He badgered his boss, the governor of Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast,²⁹ to send him newspapers and magazines brought intermittently there by ships. In voluminous, frank correspondence with an articulate, sophisticated governor named Richard Miles dating especially to 1782–3, Abson would “beg” and “pray” for the journals, and send effusive thanks when they arrived. “Please God,” he wrote to Miles once, “send you another Ship soon & that she may bring you many & them full of good News”, and in another letter he expressed an exasperated “For Gods sake send me a few News Papers”.³⁰ He explained “they are what I divert myself with” and “I can almost repeat them by heart so fond am I now of reading Papers”.³¹ A British ship captain named John Adams, who visited Abson on and off between 1786 and 1800, reported that “an English newspaper [was] his greatest luxury; for he took much interest in the passing events of Europe, and being endowed with an extraordinary memory, he became almost a chronicle of the times in which he lived, although placed in a region so remote”.³² John M’Leod, a ship’s surgeon who spent months at the English fort in Ouidah in 1803, found Abson

a man of mild and agreeable manners; cheerful and communicative in conversation, and although he had lived almost a hermit’s life, so long detached from the world, ... yet from much reading his mind was stored with that sort of knowledge which books and the public prints could supply; ... it was wonderful to observe the clear information he seemed to possess respecting all interesting matters in England.³³

I have found no references to exactly which newspapers Abson devoured. Only four, all published in London, would seem to have qualified for his reading material: the *London Gazette*, the *London Chronicle*, the *London Evening Post* and *The Times*. The *Gazette* is the oldest newspaper in the United Kingdom, a daily dating back to 1665 and still published after three and a half centuries. It has always been an official

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government journal though it was privatized in the 1990s. The *Chronicle*, put out three times a week from 1757 to 1823, contained world and national news. The *Evening Post* appeared from 1727 to 1797. The daily *Times*, founded in 1785 under a different name, was permanently renamed in 1788.

In an age when fine penmanship was a professional asset, Abson qualified. Where the ink hasn't faded, his writing is clear and usually in straight rows on lined paper. When he ran short of stationery, he complained to the Cape Coast Castle governor.³⁴ His one major writing fault, common to that era, was a frequent absence of punctuation: his sentences run into each other. This led him once to write to Miles indelicately, "I sincerely wish you health & Success in hopes of News Papers & a few Magazines."³⁵

Missing from Abson's messages to his seniors was any trace of sycophancy beyond the customary courtesies. He fearlessly (and sometimes foolhardily) spoke his mind in correspondence with his superiors at Cape Coast Castle, and in forgoing home leave ruled out any opportunity to butter up in person the bigwigs in London who controlled his career.³⁶

Abson not only wrote well calligraphically but showed journalistic and historiographic talent. His description of a 1794 French attack on Portuguese shipping in the Ouidah roadstead, about which more later, was worthy of a foreign correspondent. And the most important eighteenth-century book on Dahomey, Archibald Dalzel's *History of Dahomy*, credited Abson's "communications", also described as a "manuscript", as a major source (occupying 75 pages). Dalzel said Abson's "intelligence, and long residence on the Spot, [had] given him uncommon opportunities of collecting whatever was worthy [of] attention".³⁷ An unnamed editor who wrote Dalzel's preface said Abson's long-time residence at Ouidah "and a thorough acquaintance with the people and their language, ... [enabled him] to obtain every information he could desire, or they afford; and this the more readily, as his great knowledge is found no less useful to them, than to his employers".³⁸

Abson almost certainly contributed to another useful book but got no credit for it. The author was a German, Paul Erdmann Isert, who served the Danes on the Gold Coast. Abson hosted him at the English fort for five months in 1784–5 and seems to have been the source of at least some of Isert's information about Dahomey, particularly the

king's behavior at Abomey, the capital. The town is some sixty miles inland, and the German never visited it. (He in fact made no mention at all of Abson, perhaps extending a general disdain for Europeans on the African coast to his host, however hospitable.)³⁹ A prominent modern French historian of Dahomey, Robert Cornevin, singles out Abson among non-French fort directors for playing "a leading role" at Ouidah and for "following Dahomean politics with talent".⁴⁰

Abson put British interests first but was hardly a political chauvinist. When the governor of the Portuguese fort at Ouidah complained to him in 1788 about the violent treatment of a Portuguese ship by two British ones, he recommended to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that they act "to prevent future Trespassing of the like and to doe [*sic*] Justice to the Party injured".⁴¹

Though fully aware of recurring Franco-British rivalry and even hostilities during his years at Ouidah (and always capitalizing "Portuguese" and lower-casing "french" in his correspondence), he appeared to have warm relations with several governors of the French fort. In 1773 he helped out a long-serving governor named Guestard (1751–5, 1765–74) by providing a canoe and manpower to bring ashore from a French slave ship "all the tools of the warehouse" and carry them to the French fort. Abson's men were rewarded by the French with brandy and cloth.⁴² A later French governor, Gourg (1787–9), wrote that he was "greatly obligated" to Abson, who he believed had saved his life with sage counsel. "Through his contacts he knows everything that is happening," Gourg reported to Paris, "and he was very useful to me; he's an amiable fellow, all heart, always willing to help ... and he acquainted me with the character of the natives." Gourg accompanied the Englishman to the "Annual Customs" in Abomey that honoured dead kings. They shared a house there and dined together. (At the same time, Gourg cautioned his compatriots not to confide in the Englishman.)⁴³

The last official French governor, Deniau de la Garenne (1789–97), who had to quit Ouidah hurriedly, instructed the man he left in charge, a free "mulatto", to ask Abson to inventory the French fort's merchandise for the mulatto's use. This remarkable evidence of trust in Abson came at a time when France and England were deadly enemies.⁴⁴

British fort chiefs had practically independent authority over their small European staffs, partly because of communication difficulties

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with Cape Coast Castle. And according to a careful researcher, “that authority they appear in many cases to have abused ... Cruelty to their subordinates by neglect became ... notorious.”⁴⁵ There is no suggestion in the records that Abson, at one of the most remote posts, ever maltreated his staffers, or even slaves for that matter.

Abson’s attitude toward religion suggests he was at least brushed by the Age of Enlightenment. Of the death of David Mill, Cape Coast Castle governor from 1770 to 1777 whom he greatly admired, he wrote, with a smidgen of scepticism: “If there is Happiness to them that goes to the other World, according to their Merits, I hope he has his full share.”⁴⁶ On another occasion, Abson remarked: “The cloak of religion is often assumed to cover the most atrocious actions.”⁴⁷ And he never seemed to rue the absence of a chaplain or a church in his domain though both the French and Portuguese forts had them. Doubtless he preferred to have a competent physician on his staff, which he very rarely did, to an Anglican priest rather than an African priest.

But this erudite, diplomatic and seemingly good-natured man trafficked in slaves. Not only did he head a trading post that saw off scores of thousands to the New World, but his Company allowed him to buy and sell human beings privately to augment his income, and to possess slaves. However, slave-trade facilitators and dealers like Abson—and slave catchers and merchants like the Dahomeans—were products of their time and ought not to be judged by the moral standards of the twenty-first century. Slavery was a time-honoured institution in the eighteenth century almost everywhere in the world, and enslaving foreigners a perfectly respectable custom. The ancient Athenians, hal-lowed founders of Western democracy, were second to none in their exploitation of slaves, but we don’t hold it against them.⁴⁸

It took many centuries for abolitionism to take root in Western Europe, then spread to the rest of the world. In England, the first important step was not taken until 1772, when the return of a runaway slave to America was ruled illegal. The court verdict did not outlaw slavery in England, as is sometimes claimed, but did point the way to it. As William St Clair notes, “Until the 1780s the slave trade was not only condoned by almost all [of Britain’s] political and ecclesiastical leaders but actively approved of.”⁴⁹ The first British abolitionist organization was not founded until 1783 by a group of Quakers. And the

Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, energized by William Wilberforce, was not formed until 1787, when Abson was already in his fifties (and Wilberforce only 27). Denmark, the first country to legally abolish the slave trade in 1792, did not actually carry this out until 1804, the year after Abson died. If he ever had remorse, he kept it to himself, but he can hardly be blamed for not repudiating his career and joining the abolitionist avant-garde. In my adopted home town of Villefranche-sur-Mer, France, there is a building on the Mediterranean shore that, in my time, still had wrought-iron rings in the floor to which galley slaves were chained between 1769 and 1809. The 19 years of “torment and slavery”, including galley toil, endured by Victor Hugo’s Jean Valjean in a Marseille prison from 1796 to 1815 were not far-fetched. Many of our contemporaries would say that political slavery still flourishes in our time. For German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was “a victory of freedom over bondage”.⁵⁰ But it is universally acknowledged that traditional slavery, now called human trafficking or forced labour or sexual servitude or child labour, still plagues the world.⁵¹

A severe dressing-down that Abson received in 1793 may hint at a change of heart. His superior at Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast accused him of “apathy and indifference ... fatal lethargy which seems to have benumbed you”.⁵² During the same period, Adams similarly found Abson to be “indolent” but thought it helped make him “a complete philosopher”.⁵³ Since Abson must have been aware of England’s abolitionist movement and its arguments from his avid reading of the press, he may have been prey to regretful second thoughts, or at least waning enthusiasm for slave trading. Alternatively, his shifting belief in slavery may simply have reflected natural physical ageing. We have seen in the past century how hard it is even for the brightest people to admit that political or economic systems to which they’ve devoted their careers were wrong-headed. Many Western intellectuals resisted giving up on Marxism-Leninism despite mounting and eventually overwhelming evidence that it was an evil form of social engineering. “Was our whole life for nothing?” asked a renowned novelist who collaborated with the East German Stasi.⁵⁴

It has occurred to me that Abson’s earlier behaviour, viewing black slaves as trade goods and dealing with them as an accountant would,

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might be compared to Adolf Eichmann's behaviour toward death-camp assignees, a posture famously characterized by Hannah Arendt as "the banality of evil". For Abson, the slave trade was a business like any other, but, in starkest contrast to Eichmann, keeping the human merchandise alive and reasonably healthy was essential because the motive was profit, not extermination. He was pleased to report that 460 slaves on an English ship he saw off in 1782 were "all in good health".⁵⁵ I would like to believe it was more than just a businessman's preference for undamaged goods. The Holocaust has been succinctly described as "a giant bureaucratic apparatus recategorizing a large group of citizens as waste matter and proceeding to dispose of them as quickly as possible".⁵⁶ The European slave-trade bureaucracy viewed the captives not as waste matter but as marketable labour for New World plantations and mines, grazing lands and forests.

When a smallpox epidemic in 1783 decimated the slaves in Abson's charge before export, he mourned,⁵⁷ and there was, I think, more to it than regret over the loss in income. If he arrived in Ouidah a racist, which would have been typical for Europeans in those days, he rarely expressed antagonism toward blacks beyond distaste for such practices as human sacrifice, display of human skulls and unbridled tyranny. An exception I've found was a written outburst in 1782 about a "vile", "overbearing" and "impudent" Dahomean king named Kpengla, in sum "a bad Man", who had "upbraided" him in the presence of the French and Portuguese fort governors, apparently for not giving the monarch as costly a present as they had. "Judge how disagreeable it must be", he told Miles, "to be talked to by a Negroe in an insolent manner, without being able to help yourself."⁵⁸

But in fact, as the years passed, Abson showed increasing openness towards and respect for the local people. He appeared to treat the fort's complement of Company slaves rather well, and when he complained to Cape Coast Castle about a shortage of cowrie shells, which he often did, he cited the need to give those slaves their (meagre) wages. In what may have been his first official letter as head of the English fort, he reported that he had borrowed cowries from the governor of the French fort to pay his own fort slaves on time.⁵⁹ In the same message he said that several of those slaves had been "Sick ... with Fevers but [were] now most of them better", and he appealed for

more medicines.⁶⁰ In his many frank reports to the Cape Coast Castle governor, I haven't found the least harsh word against the fort slaves.

Besides learning the local language, Abson would eat local foods generally shunned by Europeans. He once told Miles that if he did not have whites at his table who insisted on English food, he would "care not" for a shortage of it because "I can eat Blacks provisions well enough".⁶¹ The latter included yams, which he found "very acceptable", and fermented cornmeal dough (cankie or kenkey), which he deemed a poor substitute for wheat bread.⁶² He once complained to Miles that he had "been frequently obliged to make up with a Piece of Salt Beef [a European staple] no favorite of mine I can assure you".⁶³

Abson admired a fine-woven, red-and-white-striped African cotton fabric called "Whydah Cloth"⁶⁴ and "Bonny Chints", another African cotton material, stamped with an iguana, which probably reached the Niger Delta slaving port of Bonny from the interior.⁶⁵

He seemed to appreciate African remedies for illness. When the English fort's surgeon, named Ettrick, could not help his own female friend, a white woman with leg sores, Abson persuaded him to call "a black Doctor from the french fort" to treat her. Presumably the woman's healer was a local herbalist retained by the French to minister to slaves.⁶⁶

The Ettrick incident occurred 16 years after Abson landed at Ouidah and led him to admit that he had already "been accused of making use of Blacks in preference to Whites". Far from denying it, he wrote: "I begin to think I am right."⁶⁷ He was, indeed, already on his way to going native.

Abson's closest aide, his right-hand man it would seem, was the fort's African "linguist", or interpreter, whom he called Majerrican and who served with him all 36 years. Abson had such trust in Majerrican that he sent him on missions to the king of Dahomey in Abomey when he couldn't go himself. At least once, in 1779, the king asked him to send Majerrican to Cape Coast Castle "to lay a State of his wants before the Governor" (the main "want" probably being an increase in British trade), and Abson agreed.⁶⁸ Abson and Majerrican joined the fort staff a month apart in the summer of 1767, and two weeks after Abson's death on 27 June 1803, the king of Dahomey asked Abson's successor to send Majerrican to Abomey "on Special Business".⁶⁹ (A family named Midjrokan that lives to this day in the Ouidah quarter which grew up around William's Fort has been traced to Majerrican.)⁷⁰

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Abson found positive qualities in various Dahomean officials, and appears to have spent time with some. As early as 1782 he referred to the Dahomean army as “Our Army” in a message to Miles about an attack on an enemy village.⁷¹ According to Capt. Adams, by the 1790s Abson

in habits and manners had nearly become a Dahomian; and it always forcibly struck me, when I saw him in the society of the natives, whose language he spoke fluently, that he preferred their company to that of Europeans; indeed, it was a rare occurrence for him to pay a social visit to an European resident, although he treated them with much urbanity and politeness, whenever they were pleased to pay him ceremonious or friendly visits.⁷²

Adams also reported that Abson “followed, in his domestic establishment, the customs of the country, by having a plurality of wives, by one of whom he had several children”.⁷³ Abson kept his private life private, and I have found no other evidence that he had more than one female partner. In surviving documents, he mentions her only once, as his “Wench”, a word then used in West Africa for the black concubines of English residents. In a 1782 letter, he wrote about an expensive piece of silk 11¼ yards long that he was keeping for her.⁷⁴ We don’t know her name, but Abson, as Adams indicated, did seem to treat her as his wife. They actually had four children, three boys and a girl, and Abson clearly assumed full responsibility for them. He sent his oldest son George to England for some schooling, and doted on his daughter Sally.⁷⁵

(Abson’s character and behaviour call to mind Flory, the ill-starred timber merchant of George Orwell’s first novel, *Burmese Days*, inspired by the writer’s five years of police service in Burma in the 1920s. If Orwell was only half right, the atmosphere in far-flung backwaters of the British realm had not improved more than a century after Abson’s death. Flory’s small English community included a Company manager who despised non-whites, called the Burmese “niggers”, and considered “any hint of friendly feeling [toward them] a horrible perversity”. In Orwell’s view, “he was one of those Englishmen—common, unfortunately—who should never be allowed to set foot in the East”. The British police chief was annoyed by Flory’s “Bolshie” (Bolshevik) ideas, meaning his sympathy for the Burmese, and told him not to talk “like a damned Hyde Park agitator”. Flory himself objected to “the slimy white man’s burden humbug” and deplored “our beastliness toward the

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natives". He told an Indian doctor that he saw the British colonialist "as a kind of up-to-date, hygienic, self-satisfied louse". Elsewhere Orwell summed up the whites in Burma as "boozing, womanizing ... loafers". By comparison, Abson was a guardian angel.)⁷⁶

The ancient advice to foreign newcomers to do as the Romans do was rarely followed by Europeans installed in West Africa in slave-trade times. Abson may have been the only English official to go even half-way. His extraordinary trajectory is the subject of this study. History at this personal level is, I trust, history that lives and breathes and, I hope, intrigues, as I was intrigued.

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William's Fort on the Slave Coast was so spacious it held stockyards containing cattle, sheep, goats and poultry to feed the human denizens. The outer walls were high, perhaps 8 to 10 feet, but not high enough to deter leopards who roamed the area at night. M'Leod reported that the predators "are not contented with what they actually carry off, but ... leave nothing alive which comes within the reach of their talons; and on more than one occasion during my residence ..., the stockyards have been found, in the morning, strewn with the mangled carcasses [*sic*] of their various inhabitants, even to the turkeys or guinea-hens; whilst only one of their number (generally a goat or a sheep) was missing, with which the enemy had managed to leap over a wall of considerable height" with the victim gripped in its jaws. The only livestock that could resist the big cats were a herd of about 20 to 25 beef cattle. They were consistently labelled "black", suggesting a Welsh breed that, unlike the black Scottish Angus, can resist tropical heat. The larger ones, said M'Leod, could be seen on moonlit nights "forming something like a circle for mutual defence, with their heads outwards, ready to toss the common foe, whilst the calves were uniformly observed within this ring".¹

Despite its ravages, the leopard was sacred in Dahomey, being considered ancestral to the royal family.² Abson tells of the Dahomean conquest of a town where animal-skin robes were worn. At the Annual

Customs in Abomey, the king showed European visitors the captured clothes, “except those that were made of tigers’ [leopards’] skins; which animal, being the fetish, or deity, of the country, it would have been sacrilege to have exposed their skins to public view”.³

* * *

Construction of William’s Fort was begun at Ouidah in 1684 by the Royal African Company, which then held a legal monopoly of British commerce in West Africa. Ouidah was already a major entrepôt of slaves for the transatlantic trade. A plan of the fort drawn up in 1755 by a visiting engineer named Justly Watson gives us its precise dimensions.

It was a rectangle verging on a square, bigger than an American football field. Its length of 92.5 yards fell a bit short, but its width of 82.5 yards was more than 50 per cent larger than that of the metaphoric gridiron. (The French fort at Ouidah was somewhat bigger, about 104 by 84 yards,⁴ and, judging from a 1759 plan, the Portuguese fort was even larger, about 108 yards square.)⁵ It was oriented from south to north and built entirely of sun-hardened clay, called “Loomy [loamy] Earth” by Watson. The outer wall was about 3.75 feet thick, and the only entrance was in the middle of its southern part. A moat perhaps 20 feet deep⁶ and between 10 and 17.5 feet wide encircled the fort, and a drawbridge 33.75 feet long consisting of 7.5-foot cross-boards led into it. Soil dug to create the moat, which was usually dry, was used to build the outer wall. At the four corners were gun bastions, protruding beyond the wall and of varied shapes. The southwestern bastion held the fort’s flagpole as well as cannon. Watson noted that the northeastern bastion was “in Ruins”.

Just inside the fort entrance was a guard post, and beside it places for a sergeant and a corporal. Flanking them were a storehouse, possibly for weapons, and a “Cowhouse” for the dauntless cattle. Many “Negroe Hutts”, possibly for slaves awaiting shipment, lined the inside of the eastern and western walls. In 1687 the head of the establishment, then called a factory (or trading post) rather than a fort, boasted it could hold 600 to 800 slaves destined for the Middle Passage. “I can entertaine 5 or 6 ships cargoes,” as Watson put it. This sounds exaggerated, but it does seem that in 1755 a few hundred captives could be lodged.⁷ Since Watson does not mention prisons, at least some of the

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“Negroe Hutts” may have housed rebellious captives kept in irons. The eastern row of huts was interrupted by a “Carpenter’s Shop” and a “Smiths Shop”.

The back of the fort, within the northern wall, was full of living accommodation that was collectively called “Negroe Town”. These must have housed the fort slaves, who in Abson’s time would number between 78 (in 1779) and 61 (in 1795), according to surviving English documents.⁸ A French source reported 80 slaves at William’s Fort and about 100 at the Portuguese fort in 1776, compared with 182 at the French fort.⁹ The slaves of the English officially belonged to the Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa, which had succeeded the Royal African Company in 1750. Between “Negroe Town” and a large central courtyard was a kitchen garden 90 to 100 feet long and about 20 feet wide. (There was also an English garden outside the fort, notable for its citrus trees, and possibly plots where fort slaves grew their own food.)¹⁰

The central court, roughly 90 by 120 feet, was lined with apartments for the English staff, warehouses for goods, storerooms for tools and other fort equipment, a kitchen, an adjacent “Slave Room” that may have been for cooks, a pantry, a “Cooper’s House” for the fort’s barrel maker, a “Privy” (surely there was more than one on the premises, or at least latrines), two “Stock Yards” for sheep, goats and probably pigs, and a “Poultry Yard” for guinea fowl, turkeys and doubtless chickens. Isolated within the court were a “Pidgeon House” and a powder magazine; Watson may have taken them for a single structure. According to Isert, the German doctor in Danish service who spent five months in William’s Fort in 1785, it had its powder magazine “in the middle of the yard, in the form of a dovecote”.¹¹ Like every other edifice in the fort, the clay walls of the magazine were roofed with highly combustible thatch over bamboo or palm rafters, which accounts for its isolated position. Missing from Watson’s plan is a well, or water source of any kind. Presumably rainwater was collected in drain tanks, as was the case in the French fort.¹² Also absent is a church or chapel, yet most likely “Negroe Town” was allowed a cult house or shrine to the fort site’s deity, a manifestation of the supreme creator.¹³

I have found no description of the interiors of the staff apartments, but we do know something about the appointments of comparable housing in the French fort. The walls were whitewashed and the beaten

earth floors covered with fibre carpets made by the neighboring Yoruba people. Furniture included closets, chests, tables and armchairs, and beds were protected by mosquito netting made of a fine European linen cloth called platilla.¹⁴ Europeans didn't yet know that mosquitoes cause malaria and yellow fever, but they were fully aware that it was no fun to be bitten.

Since the Watson plan doesn't indicate the height of anything, it's not clear which building or buildings had a second storey, a feature that distinguished the three European forts from all the other structures in Ouidah and earned them the title of "great houses" in the local language.¹⁵ Capt. Adams singled out "the governor's range of apartments" in William's Fort, "the windows of which front the sea [about three miles distant], and from them vessels at anchor ... are plainly seen."¹⁶ This suggests that those apartments were one flight up, as they definitely were in the French fort.¹⁷ My guess of 8 to 10 feet that a leopard had to leap to cross the outer wall is based on the estimated height of the royal palace wall in Savi, capital of the kingdom (Hueda) that included Ouidah when the forts were built. The monarch would probably not have allowed Europeans to erect walls higher than his.¹⁸ An English visitor around 1700 put the height of the fort wall at about 6 feet, but later mention of a wall of "considerable" height suggests the level was raised.¹⁹

The English fort at Ouidah lay only a musket shot east of the French fort and not much farther west of the Portuguese one. It was the oldest of the three. Work began on the French fort in 1704, directed by a privateer named Jean Doublet.²⁰ The Portuguese fort is usually dated to 1721 because a naval captain named José de Torres claimed to have built it in a few weeks that year with hundreds of local labourers, but its early history is murky, to say the least.²¹ Torres's account is suspect because a French visitor to Ouidah in 1725 wrote that no Portuguese fort had yet been built (though his observation conceivably came from an earlier visit), and two English visitors in 1727 noticed only the English and French ones.²² When the Dahomeans overran the Hueda capital in 1727 and captured most of the resident European slavers, the director of the Portuguese trading post there escaped to Ouidah on a hammock and took refuge in the French fort.²³ But a Portuguese fort was apparently functioning by the early 1730s.

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As we have seen, the three forts did not differ much in size.²⁴ This has been attributed to a desire by the kings of Hueda to treat European traders equally.²⁵ This would indeed have been in keeping with an extraordinary “peace or neutrality” treaty imposed by a Hueda ruler in 1703 on European nations trading there. Anyone refusing to sign or obey it would be permanently expelled from the country. The pact prohibited hostilities between Europeans even if they were at war with each other in Europe. It covered the roadstead where vessels anchored (Ouidah had no natural harbour) and even any waters within sight of the Hueda coast. If a ship of one nation seized, disturbed, insulted or began a dispute with that of another, the top local representative of the aggressor had to pay a fine of eight male slaves to the victim, chosen by the latter. Every ship captain arriving in the roadstead had either to sign the peace treaty or have it signed for him by his local representative before he could start to trade. If a war was on in Europe, ships could not set sail at the same time, but rather 24 hours apart. The national representative of a violator had to pay the king 10 male slaves. And, to add a sort of *quid pro quo* to the agreement, if a subject of the king insulted or robbed a European, he was liable to the death penalty or enslavement. When Dahomey conquered and annexed Hueda in 1727, the neutrality policy was continued. Because both African slave sellers and European slave buyers benefited, it lasted nearly a century. A French naval attack in 1794 on Portuguese shipping in the Ouidah road, described in detail by Abson, ended European harmony.²⁶

The 1703 treaty showed who was, and who would remain, the boss on that small stretch of the African coast, not much more than 25 miles long but disproportionately rich in the human exports called black gold.²⁷ The three European establishments at Ouidah were forts in name only, unlike those on the Gold Coast that were built of stone or brick and had tiled roofs. Rain and neglect quickly degraded the earthen walls at Ouidah, and the thatched roofs were highly flammable. Humidity corroded and honeycombed the cannon, which frequently lacked carriages. The last time William’s Fort guns served any military purpose was in 1763, four years before Abson’s arrival, when the English helped the Dahomeans fight off an attack by African enemies. In Abson’s time their only use was for saluting. Fort garrisons were tiny—Abson usually had only three British soldiers—and there was no

serious thought of imposing European power on African hosts. The forts' distance from the sea meant that they could not control the landing of supplies or receive naval support and reinforcements. They could, in fact, be easily surrounded and besieged, and starved into submission. This the Europeans always recognized. As early as 1728 a high Portuguese official observed that "none of the fortresses built at the Port of Ajuda [Ouidah] are capable of defending themselves when the Negroes want to insult them".²⁸ The main purpose of the forts was to store and protect trade goods, and house slaves awaiting shipment. They also served as sanctuaries for compatriots and other visitors. The authority of the European governors actually extended to African communities that grew up outside each fort, but this was granted them by the king of Dahomey and his "viceroy" in Ouidah, the Yovogan, or "Captain of the White Men", who exercised real authority. As Robin Law, perhaps the foremost historian of the Slave Coast, has observed, "In Ouidah, there was never any question that the European establishments were in the final analysis subject to local control, rather than representing independent centres of European power."²⁹

M'Leod describes Abson's final Yovogan, who most likely had been one of his conversational companions. He was:

a man of majestic stature, and possessed an uncommon share of dignity ... The most polished courtier of Europe, could not have deported himself more gracefully on public occasions ..., or have carried on a conference with greater ease and affability. He was master ... of the English, French and Portuguese languages ... [having] in his younger days been much connected with [the three forts] officially, as a linguist ... [He] understood perfectly what was said to him by Mr. Abson ... After the business of ceremony was finished, he laid aside all formality and conversed in a familiar manner upon general subjects.³⁰

If any of the three forts was favoured by Dahomean rulers, it was the French, though it's not clear why. Labarthe, who admittedly spent only 15 days in the country, reported that "the French fort is first, and the [French] nation enjoys the distinction of being preferred to the two others". He even maintained that Ouidah natives regarded the French fort director as superior to the other two. He traced this favoritism to Agaja, the king who defeated the Hueda and conquered Ouidah. According to Labarthe, Agaja faced opposition from the Dutch, who

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had a trading post at the Hueda capital Savi (which Labarthe wrongly placed in Ouidah) and drove them out of the country. Emboldened by his success, Agaja attacked the French fort at Ouidah, only to be repulsed by cannon. This, Labarthe wrote, “inspired in this king great esteem for the French; he assured the fort commander that his [behaviour] was a sure guarantee of the zeal he would show in defending [Dahomey] against enemy invasions”.³¹ Labarthe ranked the English fort second.³²

Labarthe was probably correct about the French being ranked first because it is recognized elsewhere, but his explanation is dubious. So, too, is a charge he made against the English, accusing them of “making every effort to destroy the other nations; but in spite of their intrigues they can’t obtain preference, because it’s impossible for them to supply merchandise equal to that of the French”.³³ In fact, only six years after Labarthe’s visit it was the French who wrecked nearly a century of peaceful international trade.

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The company that owned all the British forts in West Africa might, in modern parlance, be termed a form of state capitalism. As mentioned above, the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa was created in 1750 as successor to the Royal African Company, founded in 1672. In nearly eight decades, the Royal African Company had largely failed to achieve its goal of earning huge profits from the slave trade. The most comprehensive study of the Royal Company that we have, by K.G. Davies, concluded that the trade's reputation for lucrativeness was overblown. It was instead, he said, a very risky gamble. "Success depended not only upon the personal qualities of trader and captain, but upon a range of variable factors beyond the control of either. The alternations of war and peace in the remote African interior could determine scarcity or glut of negroes; an outbreak of disease on the Middle Passage could wipe out profits in a few days; and the fluctuations of the colonial economies and the world-prices of colonial products could make or mar the whole voyage."¹

Davies's 1957 assessment is somewhat dated. We now know that British ships transported more slaves to the New World in the eighteenth century than any other nation, which suggests that the risk was well worth taking. Curtin's groundbreaking "census" of 1969 estimated the number of Africans carried in English hulls in that century at 2,214,000.² Subsequent research has refined the figure upward to 2,545,298.³

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It is true, however, that the Royal Company itself played a minor and diminishing role in the eighteenth-century trade. It lost its monopoly status in 1698 when Parliament allowed private persons to trade in Africa on payment of a duty to the Company, and it lost even that advantage in 1712 when unrestricted private trade became open to all. The Company now had to pay the entire cost of its facilities, considered vital by Parliament, and no longer had the means to compete with private merchants.

The Company of Merchants was intended to solve the problem by facilitating trade rather than controlling it. As reasoned in the opening sentence of its founding document, "Whereas the Trade to and from Africa is very advantageous to Great Britain, and necessary for supplying the Plantations and Colonies ... with a sufficient Number of Negroes at reasonable Rates; ... [it] ought to be free and open to all his Majesty's Subjects."⁴ The new Company inherited all of the Royal African Company's forts, settlements, territory and property to that end, but was strictly forbidden to trade in its corporate capacity and "to lay any Restraint whatsoever" on British traders.⁵

Authority was vested in a committee (hereafter the Committee) composed of nine traders, elected annually, three each from England's three main slaving ports, Liverpool, Bristol and London, and headquartered in the capital. A constitution authorized the Committee to issue orders for governing and maintaining the forts, and to appoint and make rules for the staffs. The Committee's income would come entirely from Parliamentary grants—during Abson's time it was fixed at £13,000 a year—and Parliament retained final authority over the Company.

The state's role went even further: three branches of government supervised the Committee. Copies of all orders and regulations had to be submitted to the Exchequer. The Board of Trade could fire any Committee men or their appointees in Africa if found guilty of misbehaviour. (The board was replaced in 1782 by a Privy Council committee with the same power.) And the Admiralty could send naval captains to inspect the nine forts involved and report back on their condition. The Company could not, in fact, have survived without the support of the Royal Navy, which kept open communication between London and the African posts throughout the Company's existence.

The money received by the Committee from Parliament, after deduction of £800 for management expenses in England, was to go

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“wholly to the Maintenance, Support, and Improvement of the Forts and Settlements ... and for keeping them in good Repair; and for providing Ammunition, and other Stores, and Officers and Soldiers to defend the same; and for paying the said Officers and Soldiers”.⁶ In practice, a shipload of supplies was sent once a year to the headquarters at Cape Coast Castle and distributed to the other posts from there. The shipments included equipment for the forts, food and clothing for the white personnel, and trade goods. While the Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa’s constitution did not specify that personnel could trade privately for slaves, they did, and in fact they were encouraged to do so. Asked by the Board of Trade about the matter in 1764, the Committee said it approved of such trade because it “encourages the natives to bring down their slaves [from the interior to the coast] ... in the [temporary] absence of [English] ships ... as otherwise they would be obliged to carry them to the forts of other nations”.⁷ Since salaries of fort personnel were paid in supplies of all kinds, part could be used for private trade.⁸

Records of supplies delivered to and stored in William’s Fort in Abson’s time give us a good picture of what went on there. The least important category of imports was the fort’s military equipment, never fired in anger in Abson’s 36 years. The cannon that occupied the four corner bastions, with a few placed outside the moat for saluting, were of seven different bores according to the weight of the projectiles, which ranged from one to twelve pounds. The highest total of cannons documented was 35 in 1789–90.⁹ Cannonballs were referred to as “round shot,” and barrels of gunpowder were a common import because it was used not only for cannon salutes but for presents to Dahomean authorities and as trade goods. Cannon-firing aids included ladles and sponges. Other guns were very few. Two “cohorns” were carried on several ordnance lists. They were brass mortars for throwing light shells (named after their Dutch inventor, Menno van Coehoorn). Sometimes only one musket was reported in store, along with one bayonet, and lead balls, plus accoutrements like cartridge paper, “rammers” (ramrods), “worms” (wad and ball extractors) and powder horns. Hand grenades, probably composed of iron spheres filled with gunpowder and fitted with fuses, were another available weapon. Military stores also included hourglasses and spyglasses, flags, flagstaffs and halyards, and a drum and a horn for a hint of martial music.

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A smaller and less-talked-about category of imports was iron shackles for slaves, which included handcuffs, chains, collars and rings. Presumably these were for rebellious slaves waiting to be shipped to the New World, and not for the fort's own slaves unless they became particularly unruly. Besides grief over their loss of freedom, family and fatherland, some prisoners probably shared a common belief among newly enslaved Africans that they would be taken across the ocean to be eaten.

A larger slice of Committee shipments consisted of tools and accessories for carpenters, coopers, blacksmiths, bricklayers and gardeners. Although the British-led Industrial Revolution was just gathering steam, the collection of tools at William's Fort was already impressive. They included adzes, anvils, augers, axes, beams, bells, bolsters, borers, brasses, chisels, dowels, drivers, funnels, gimlets, gouges, hammers, handles, hasps, hinges, hooks, irons, knives, locks, pickaxes, pincers, planes, punches, saws, scales, screws, shovels, spades, spokes, springs, squares, staples, trowels, vices and weights. West Africans had mastered iron smelting centuries earlier and produced tools,¹⁰ but the technological gap was already wide and would grow much wider in subsequent decades.

While Abson did not object to African food, other staff members expected and received provisions from England to supplement the fort's own produce and no doubt what they considered edible from the Ouidah market and the local fish catch. The imports included casks of salt beef and salt pork; honey, hams, biscuits, firkins (weighing 56 pounds each) of butter, kegs or loaves of sugar; barrels, kegs or casks of flour, probably of wheat; pounds of tea, pints or quarts of unspecified oil, gallons of vinegar, pounds of pepper, bottles of mustard, boxes of raisins, half-jars of currants, and ounces of nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves and mace. An unusual condiment was ketchup, which first appeared in the fort records in 1801—most likely it was not the tomato kind. Sea salt was probably obtained from local salt pans.

Abson once told Miles that "we are not great Drinkers here", referring to the fort's staff, but that observation must be set against the inclusion of a great deal of alcoholic beverages among staple provisions.¹¹ Personnel received many gallons of rum and brandy, hogsheads of claret and beer (porter), and cases or quarter-casks of white wine. Perhaps per capita consumption was less than at other British posts.

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Dining utensils and cooking ware came along with the provisions. The records mention knives and forks (but, oddly, not spoons), plates and dishes, crockery, "glass" (presumably meaning glasses), corks by the gross (144 per load), a mortar and pestle, a grinding stone, a spit and a gridiron.

The staff dressed as Englishmen and required appropriate haberdashery. Supplies of cloth were described as white or scarlet, linen, silk serge, skeins of silk, and cambric. (If there was a tailor or seamstress among the fort slaves I have found no mention of him or her. In Abson's case, his mistress may have made his clothes as she would have her own.) White cotton stockings, shoes, slippers and round hats were also provided, as was soap, starch and a blue dye. Abson complained once to Miles that Kpengla had, at the Annual Customs in Abomey, taken from him his "Uniform Hanger & did not behave like a King for he gave me nothing for it".¹² He asked Miles for a replacement. Abson may have worn the uniform on formal occasions only. It's not clear whether other staffers wore them too. A shipment of supplies delivered to the French fort in 1773 included waistcoats, shirts, knee breeches and caps,¹³ which suggests that all personnel there at least possessed formal garb.

Cloth was also furnished to William's Fort for towels, bedding, curtains, upholstery and tablecloths. It included dimity (a cotton fabric used for curtains and bedspreads), sheeting, huckaback (a cloth for towels), and osnaburg (a fabric for upholstery and curtains).

Other supplies for the staffers and the fort itself included wax candles, candlesticks, tallow, lanterns, bells and stationery.

The Company also supplied the fort with medicines. They included calomel, which, as we have seen, was surely counterproductive, but some may have been helpful, like salves and purgatives.

The most varied and copious category of the Company's cargoes for the Ouidah fort consisted of trade goods for buying slaves. Since the Committee in London could not itself trade for slaves, the goods were meant for the private dealings of the British staff, for the fort's purchase of slaves on credit for third parties, and for the acquisition of fort slaves.

The trade goods handled by Abson belie the myth that Africa was a dumping ground for European gewgaws and shoddy wares in return for slaves. African merchants were generally clever, demanding customers, discriminating buyers quick to detect and reject inferior prod-

ucts, and hard bargainers. Despite being for the most part illiterate, they had astounding minds for commercial transactions and pledges, a talent frequently noted in the literature.

The Dutch trader and author Willem Bosman, who visited the Ouidah area three times in the waning years of the seventeenth century, wrote that the local traders were “so accurately quick in their Merchandise Accompts, that they easily reckon as justly and as quick in their Heads alone, as we with the assistance of Pen and Ink, though the Summ amounts to several Thousands”.¹⁴ French ship captain Jean-Pierre Thibault Des Marchais wondered about the same men:

Who know their business as well as they, who do it with more competence & finesse, who see it more clearly, who know better how to take advantage of time & opportunity? Without knowing the rules of arithmetic, they know how to compute in their head the price of their merchandise, & they do it at least as quickly as a skillful arithmetician could do with a pen or counters, & no fear that they’ll make a mistake or forget the slightest thing, no more than in the commissions they are entrusted with.¹⁵

Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, who headed the French fort in 1763–4, found Ouidah traders “most certainly very skillful merchants”.¹⁶ Later in the century, Gourg noted that the Dahomeans “count cowries with astonishing ease and speed”.¹⁷ M’Leod called the Ouidah merchants

extremely remarkable for their retentive memories; for though entirely unacquainted with letters they will yet point out, with the most perfect accuracy, on ... slips of paper [promissory notes], the name, quantity, and quality of every article written on them months before, in the order in which they were set down, however great the number of their notes may be; and all this merely from recollection.¹⁸

In 1861, Aristide-Louis Vallon, a French naval officer, wrote of the “inordinate memory” of high Dahomean officials.¹⁹

Judging from the adjectives that appear most frequently in early European books on West Africa, black traders tended to be prudent, careful, wary, cautious, circumspect, tenacious, discerning, shrewd, perspicacious, exact, crafty, cunning—in sum, able businessmen. They knew European trade goods as well as, or better than, the Europeans. Despite illiteracy, at least some could make intricate calculations in

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their head. They had taste, were open to novelty, and were attuned to African needs and desires. They instinctively played off European merchants against each other. If they felt abused, they would break off trade. As Davies remarks about the Royal Company, "The impression left by the company's records is that the pattern of trade was imposed by the African on the European rather than *vice versa*."²⁰

The number 1 trade good was cloth. It has been calculated that two-thirds by value of England's exports to Africa in the eighteenth century consisted of textiles.²¹ The most common were fabrics obtained from India, or European copies of them. Some bore exotic names now long forgotten: allegars, baffetas, bajutapeaux, calawapores, chelloes, cherryderries or caladaris, goshees, neganipauts and sastracundies. These were usually cottons, sometimes mixed with silk, sometimes striped, flowered or checked, with blue, red and white as the prevailing colours. Other Indian cloths had names that are still with us. Handkerchiefs, both cotton and silk, included bandanas, pullicats and rumals. Cottons included chintz and gingham, silks damask, taffeta and brocade, the last-mentioned usually a gift rather than a trade good. Exceptionally popular were narrow cottons called Guinea stuffs or Guinea cloths, blue or white or both, striped or checked, made expressly in India for the African trade. Indian calico has been described as "the single most important textile product sold by England to Africa" in the eighteenth century,²² but strangely it does not appear, at least by that name, in surviving records of William's Fort.

Besides copying Indian fabrics, Europeans contributed linens and woollens to the trade. Linens called silesias or sletias, first made in Germany and later in England as well—their flimsiness may have given us the word sleazy—were big sellers in West Africa.²³ So were woollens or worsteds called says, made in England, Holland, Flanders and Germany. Europeans not only imitated Indian silks but contributed satins and velvets suitable as gifts to African authorities. Manchester and Liverpool added their own checked cottons to the Indian and pseudo-Indian cottons that flowed to Ouidah. Though the platilla linen used for mosquito netting in the French fort is not mentioned in surviving William's Fort documents, Abson sold slaves to a French ship in 1773 for goods that included a large number of platillas.²⁴

Metal goods from Europe were the second-largest category of slave-trade merchandise. From start to finish of the trade, basins were

included in cargoes, and freight for Ouidah was no exception. Metal content and source were not usually specified, but basins were of brass, copper, pewter or tin, and were made in Germany, Holland, Flanders, Wallonia, France or England. Pans were another staple of the trade. They were usually made of brass, sometimes of copper, occasionally of tin. At Ouidah in 1694, neptunes (as pans were often called) were being cut up into neck, arm and leg ornaments,²⁵ but I don't know if this continued into Abson's time. Big pans were used for butchering and cleaning livestock, bathing, and boiling or evaporating seawater to obtain salt. Pans were also used for stewing or baking, for keeping palm oil, or for shrines on graves. Pewter kitchenware, particularly tankards, was also popular.

A major metal trade good was iron bars, which came from many European countries and even Siberia. All were flat, but their length and weight varied greatly, from 7 inches up to 18 feet, and from 11 to 64 pounds. They provided African smiths with abundant raw material for farm tools, weapons and bullets, household utensils, their own smithing implements, animal traps, chains, bangles and gongs. Slaves were valued at 40 iron bars at Ouidah in the 1770s.²⁶ Lead bars were also brought to Ouidah. They may have been converted into musket balls and fishing sinkers. Another import was copper rods.

European knives were big sellers throughout West Africa. The only specified source I have found for knives shipped to Ouidah is Holland, but presumably they also came from Birmingham and Sheffield in England, and possibly Flanders, Germany or France. Cutlasses were listed separately. This seems to have been a generic term for a number of curved, broad-bladed cutting tools and weapons that included machetes, billhooks and cutting knives. They were used for clearing farmland, paths and living areas as well as in warfare.

Guns mentioned in the Ouidah trade records were described as Danes and birdings. The former referred to flintlocks as long as 5½ feet, originated in Denmark in the eighteenth century and later produced in Germany as well (and still used by some West African hunters). The latter guns were fowling pieces. Warfare and slave raiding doubtless surpassed hunting in gun use, and the weapons were also employed to protect crops from wild animals, as sheer noisemakers at ceremonies and festivities, and as symbols of royal prestige and power. Barrels of gunpowder accompanied the arms.

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Other metal imports included padlocks and draw-boys, a mechanism for operating a hand loom. William's Fort may also have received manillas, open-ended bracelets or rings that Europeans traded to West Africans from the 1470s to the nineteenth century. Made of various metals, they were at first used as arm and leg ornaments, and later melted down by African smiths for other purposes or used as money. Dalzel wrote of large, valuable gold manillas adorning the arms of women who in 1727 shaded the king of Dahomey with umbrellas and guarded him with guns.²⁷ The only reference to manillas I have found in William's Fort files, however, is a 1783 request by Abson for "2 nice Silver Manilos" intended as a gift for the Migan, the king's chief minister.²⁸ But this suggests that silver manillas remarked by M'Leod around the Yovogan's wrists in 1803 were also presents from Abson.²⁹

Glass beads came from Venice. They contributed to the impression that Europeans bought slaves with baubles, but beads never amounted to even 5 per cent of the total goods paid by Englishmen for slaves in the eighteenth century, and that small share shrank beginning in the 1780s.³⁰ Moreover, as Lewis Mumford pointed out, "Genuine value lies in the power to sustain or enrich life: a glass bead may be more valuable than a diamond."³¹ Beads made of Mediterranean red coral (*Corallium rubrum*) were another import. Like basins and manillas, they were among the first goods Europeans brought to West Africa.

The money used at Ouidah and in all of Dahomey was a small, creamy-white cowrie shell (*Cypraea moneta*) found in the Maldive Islands in the Indian Ocean and brought to West Africa in the billions by Europeans. In 1773 a French slave ship took 35 million strung cowries to Ouidah in bags and barrels.³² The English shipped 3,660,600 pounds of cowries to West Africa from 1771 to 1799, or about a billion and a half shells.³³ The vulviform mollusc was first carried to Europe as ballast, then exported to Africa. It was, as one can imagine, a crucial component of the goods shipped to William's Fort by the Company. In the last half of the nineteenth century, a larger cowrie from Zanzibar and other places on and off the East African coast, *Cypraea annulus*, replaced *moneta* in the trade to West Africa.³⁴

Another indispensable import was alcohol, more specifically rum and brandy. They were not only trade goods, but essential gifts or recompense to African officials and their entourages, merchants, workers

and messengers. French brandy, called generically *eau-de-vie*, was especially prized. Labarthe termed it “the most popular commodity on the whole coast of Africa”, and thought nothing could be accomplished without a gift of it.³⁵ Another eighteenth-century French source wrote that “the inordinate passion of the Blacks for eau-de-vie and for the liquors that compose it is a great resource for our shipowners”.³⁶ The same ship that took 35 million cowries to Ouidah brought nearly 18,000 gallons of brandy. French brandy was also carried by the vessels of other nations, including England, but Abson’s papers suggest he dealt mainly with English-made brandy, which was cheaper, though he personally preferred the French variety.

American slave-ship cargoes featuring rum made in New England have been well publicized, but most of the rum that reached Ouidah probably originated on Caribbean islands like Barbados, Jamaica and Antigua and was carried in English ships, or came from Brazil via Portuguese slavers. Supplies were, however, temporarily disrupted by America’s Revolutionary War to the advantage of the Yankees, leading the London Committee, in 1783, to order English forts in Africa not to accept “North American Rum ... as it appears that encouraging the Consumption of that Article ... is prejudicial to the Agriculture and Manufacturers of this Kingdom and its Dependencies”.³⁷ Notwithstanding African thirst for rum and brandy, and the way liquor is sometimes played up in publications on the slave trade, the share of alcohol in Africa-bound English cargoes averaged less than 3 per cent by value in the first half of the eighteenth century, and rose above 7 per cent only in the 1770s.³⁸ These percentages may have included drinks meant for white staff.

Another European vice that was shared with Africans was tobacco smoking. Tobacco reached the Slave Coast from the New World by the early seventeenth century, and by the 1640s pipe smoking had become a local habit.³⁹ The tobacco Dahomeans favoured was a very special kind. It was grown in Brazil, principally around Bahia, and was considered of such low quality by the Portuguese that it was called “reject” and barred from export to Lisbon. The leaves, thin or broken, were treated liberally with molasses to keep them from drying up or rotting. The resultant flavour and aroma appealed to Africans, especially on the Slave Coast, and Bahia tobacco became a major trade good into the

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nineteenth century. Many ships carried only tobacco from Bahia to Ouidah, in exchange for slaves.⁴⁰ The English, French and Dutch tried to imitate it but failed,⁴¹ and ended up obtaining it from the Portuguese for resale to Africans. The tobacco came in the form of rolls weighing between 60 and 90 pounds, and at times slaves could be purchased for as few as five rolls each.⁴² It was smoked in pipes that came mainly from Holland but that were also made in England and France. Liverpool exported 257,904 pipes to Africa in 1770.⁴³ The French ship that reached Ouidah in 1773 loaded with cowries and *eau-de-vie* also brought 34,560 pipes, plus 231 rolls of Brazilian tobacco which it bought along the African coast on the way there.⁴⁴

Last but hardly least were the goods to be given away as presents, bribes, taxes such as import duties, or rewards for service. The mighty and powerful fancied silver-headed canes, gold-braided hats, laced coats, rich silks, fine chintz, elegant umbrellas and the like. Gunpowder went to persons qualified to use it. Brandy or rum was an almost obligatory offering up and down the line. And so were cowries.⁴⁵

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In the literature on West Africa, Ouidah is primarily remembered for its conspicuous role in the slave trade. By 1671 business was already so good that the French established a trading lodge there.¹ According to Law, the earliest extant document written from Ouidah is a letter from an English trader dated to 1681.² Recent figures show nearly 60,000 slaves being shipped from the Bight of Benin, where Ouidah was by far the principal outlet, from 1661 to 1680, nearly 80,000 from 1681 to 1690, and more than 108,000 in the final decade of the seventeenth century. Slave exports from the bight peaked at nearly 200,000 in 1721–30 and continued high throughout the eighteenth century, though Ouidah's share decreased.³ Nevertheless, statistics suggest that from 1670 to 1870, Ouidah shipped well over a million slaves, more than any other African embarkation point apart from Luanda, Angola.⁴ All of them passed through a small town that may not have had even 2,000 inhabitants before the Dahomean conquest of 1727 and may have reached a maximum of 8,000 later in the eighteenth century.⁵ It now has a population of about 100,000.

Besides "*la traite*", as the French euphemistically called and still call the slaving business, other aspects of life in and around Ouidah caught the eyes of European visitors. They were impressed, for instance, by the farmland beyond what they recognized as the disease-breeding coastal marshes. In 1682 Barbot saw

hardly any land uncultivated, which makes it fair and pleasant. It abounds in maize, rice, millet, and generally in all the crops that there are on Gold Coast. Thanks to the good pastures, many sheep, oxen, cows, ... deer, ... pigs, and fowls are also found there...The water from the springs is fine, good, clear, and light.⁶

In 1694 Capt. Phillips found the Hueda kingdom “the pleasantest country [he had] seen in *Guiney*, consisting of champaigns [plains] and small ascending hills, beautify’d with always green shady groves of lime, wild orange, and other trees, and irrigated with divers broad fresh rivers, which yield plenty of good fish.” From Ouidah to the royal capital at Savi, he said, “very pleasant fields [were] full of *India* and *Guiney* corn [maize and millet], [sweet] potatoes, yams in great plenty, of which they have two harvests yearly.”⁷

The Dutchman Bosman wrote about the Ouidah area:

The great numbers of all sorts of beautiful and lofty Trees, which seem designedly planted in exact order; afford the most beautiful Prospect in the World; ... not so much as one Mountain or Hillock interposeth to interrupt the View; ... your Eyes are regaled with a Prospect of the most charming Place that Imagination can represent; nor can I believe, that any Country in the World can shew the like. Besides which this Land is covered with a beautiful Verdure, ... plentifully provided with three sorts of Corn [cereals], Beans, [sweet] Potatoes, and other Fruits ... no place which is thought fertile can escape planting...The Charms of this Country have ... transported me.⁸

Bosman enumerated the livestock raised—cattle, goats, sheep, hogs, chickens, turkeys and ducks—and edible wild birds of many kinds. He also listed other crops grown—maize, millet and what may have been sorghum were his “three sorts of Corn”, yams, onions, ginger and indigo—and the tree products gathered, including citrons, lemons, oranges, plantains, bananas, pepper, tamarinds and oil-palm nuts. Millet beer, he said, made by women, was preferred to palm wine.⁹

A Dane, Erick Tilleman, who visited West Africa around the same time as Bosman, reported the Hueda land “very flat and fertile everywhere, with great quantities of grain, cattle, and other things. The inhabitants ... brew beer and bake bread as well as in Europe.”¹⁰

English slave trader Bulfinch Lamb, who spent two years in the mid-1720s in Abomey as a prisoner of Agaja, the king who would conquer

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the Hueda people of Ouidah in 1727 and extend Dahomean rule to the seacoast, described the country around the inland capital as “mighty healthful, ... and is daily refreshed with fine cool Breezes: It is likewise extremely pleasant, ... neither are we pester’d with Musketoos.”¹¹

Another English trader, William Snelgrave, who visited the Slave Coast several times between 1717 and 1730, remarked that the Ouidah region, “being a very rich Soil, and well cultivated by the Inhabitants, ... looked like an intire [*sic*] Garden”.¹² Royal Navy ship’s surgeon John Atkins stopped at Ouidah in 1721 and reported that provisions there were “plentiful above any place on the whole [West African] Coast”, citing cattle, sheep, pigs and fowl.¹³

Six years later Royal Company surveyor William Smith waxed positively ecstatic. He found the countryside:

the most pleasant I ever yet beheld ... All who have ever been here, allow this to be one of the most delightful Countries in the World. The great Number and Variety of tall, beautiful and shady Trees, ... seem as if planted in fine Groves for Ornament ...; also the verdant Fields are every-where cultivated ... with a great Number of pretty little Villages ... All these contribute to afford the most delightful Prospect that Imagination can form ... the imaginary Beauty of *Elysian* Fields cannot surpass the real Beauty of this Country.¹⁴

Pruneau de Pommegorge wrote:

In general, the farther one goes inland, the more beautiful the country ... The land produces absolutely anything one wants; all the fruits of America & of Asia do perfectly there, with most being native to the country. The oranges are the best of any known country, of a size & quality superior to that of China & America.

He also mentions pineapples, grapes, red beans, peas, cabbages, [sweet] potatoes, yams, bananas, figs, peppers, kapok trees, and a rose-colored dye. “This country”, he adds, “moreover produces all the fruits of tropical countries, & would be a vast field of instruction for a curious botanist ... In general, the land produces everything necessary to life.” Pruneau de Pommegorge adds that the Dahomeans raise goats and chickens (but that cattle were a royal monopoly shared only by the three European forts), and reports an abundance of edible game.¹⁵

In 1768, when Archibald Dalziel headed William’s Fort, he described Dahomey as “the most pleasant country on the coast of Guinea”.¹⁶

English slaver Robert Norris, travelling inland from Ouidah by hammock in 1772, found the landscape “extremely agreeable; it is mostly open, and a considerable portion of it cultivated”. A few miles north were “plantations of yams, [sweet] potatoes, callivances [chickpeas], and corn ... All writers who have described this country, extol its natural beauties and the fertility of its soil.”¹⁷

Isert reported in 1785 that the Ouidah area was

one of the most attractive of all the places where the Europeans have settled [in West Africa]. The ground is level and blessed with meadows in which there are fresh water sources scattered all around. It rains more often here than in Akra [Accra], thus resulting in an uninterrupted Spring.¹⁸

Labarthe, the 1788 French visitor to Ouidah, reported that the hilly country around Ouidah was “covered with the most beautiful trees [and the soil] planted with maize ... harvested twice a year”. Inland the earth was “generally very fertile, the country watered by little rivers and brooks, the plains, vales and woods in succession offering the most varied and agreeable views”. To the produce listed above, he added guava and cashew trees, pumpkins, coffee, cotton and guinea fowl, and found the pigs “better than those in Europe”, and the goats “equal to the best European sheep”.¹⁹

In the waning years of the eighteenth century, Adams found the land around Ouidah “fertile, open, and level, ... although in some parts thickly wooded with fine grown trees. To the north of the town are some well cultivated lands producing pease, calavancies, maize, and yams.”²⁰

Up to Abson’s final days, European newcomers were still exclaiming at the Dahomean landscape. His last English house guest, John M’Leod, was:

forcibly struck ... by the novelty of every scene. The grand tropical trees ...; the delicious fruits...growing spontaneously in all directions; ... vegetation in its richest and most luxurious form. Many of the trees are of such gigantic bulk that canoes ... capable of containing with ease, from seventy to an hundred men, have been formed from their trunks ... The sugar cane ... raised here, grows vigorously to an uncommon size. The yams, corn, and callavances, which they plant in alternate rows, give a delightful aspect to their fields ... their crops are extremely abundant ... Dahomy produces, in great perfection, all the immense variety of fine fruits found within the torrid zone ... Cattle, sheep, goats, and poultry of every description are found in Dahomy in greater

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plenty than in most other parts of Africa ... It produces a great variety of game, such as hares, deer, partridges, quails, doves, pigeons.²¹

These concurring observations by white visitors were surprisingly objective, considering their common inclination to find fault with things African. What they didn't recognize, and may not have been aware of, was that many of the crops they saw were not of African origin and had been adopted by West African farmers in previous centuries. Some had first appeared in European fort gardens and had probably been spread by the Africans who worked them. Some of the crops cited above originated, for example, in the New World. They included maize, sweet potatoes, pineapples, guavas and cashew nuts. The peppers and beans mentioned almost certainly included chili (*Capsicum*) peppers and common beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*), both from the Western Hemisphere. The pumpkins may have been *Cucurbita pepo*, also from the Americas. Unnoticed but surely present were transatlantic cassava (manioc) and papayas. And so, too, was tobacco, though Dahomeans preferred the Brazilian import if they could afford it.²²

Besides the idyllic landscapes, early Europeans also focused on certain aspects of local religion. Bosman wrote:

A long time past, when the *English* first began to Trade here, there happened a very Remarkable and Tragical Event. An *English* Captain being landed, some of his Men and part of his Cargo, they found a Snake in their House, which they immediately killed without the least Scruple, and not doubting but that they had done a good Work, threw out the dead Snake at their Door; where being found by the *Negroes* in the Morning, the *English* preventing [anticipating] the Question who had done the Fact, ascribed the Honour to themselves; which so incensed the Natives, that they furiously fell on the *English*, killed them all and Burned their House and Goods.

This struck such a Terror into that Nation, that for a long time they refrain'd coming thither ...; but at last coming again, the *Negroes* were accustomed to shew all *Europeans* that came thither some Snakes, desiring that they would not hurt them, by reason that they were their Gods; and this hath prevented all such Accidents ever since; so that at present few *Europeans* come hither who are not advertis'd of this Snake-Worship.²³

Bosman's account cannot be confirmed in British records but is not implausible. Europeans had already reported snake worship at Ouidah

in the 1680s. In 1694 Capt. Phillips regarded the serpent as “the god of the Whidawers”.²⁴ The sacred reptile was (and remains) a royal python (*Python regius*), though it was not recognized as a python in European literature until the mid-nineteenth century.²⁵ It is the smallest of African pythons, rarely exceeding four feet in length but sometimes reaching five or six, thick-bodied, non-poisonous (like all pythons), and so docile, placid, gentle, harmless, inoffensive and tractable, even affectionate according to one source, that it was semi-domesticated at Ouidah and is now bred in the West as a household pet. It is a handsome multicoloured and patterned creature, made even more so through selective breeding including exploitation of genetic mutations. In the wild it eats small mammals like mice, rats and shrews. In captivity it can live more than forty years. It is sometimes called the ball python because when threatened it curls itself into a tight ball.

The royal python is found all across Africa, from Senegal to Sudan and Uganda, but is worshipped only in eastern Liberia, southeastern Nigeria and southern Uganda, as well as in southern Benin (the name to which Dahomey was changed in 1975). Nowhere has royal python worship drawn more attention in historical literature than in the Ouidah region, called by Wikipedia the “chief centre” of serpent worship in Africa.

According to local legend, an early king of the Hueda introduced the snake cult from a neighbouring land in the mid-sixteenth century. By the time Europeans became aware of it in the late seventeenth century, it was well developed. The pythons were housed and fed in a temple in the middle of town, close to where the French fort would be located. A corps of priests and especially priestesses was consecrated to the holy serpents, with special songs, dances and frequent rituals. When the Hueda king imposed a “peace or neutrality” treaty on local Europeans in 1703, he is said to have sworn “by the great Snake”—presumably the biggest and oldest of the python community—that anyone who refused to sign or obey the pact would be permanently expelled from the kingdom.

Johannes Rask, chaplain at a Danish fort on the Gold Coast from 1709 to 1713, reported (probably at second hand) that there were “indescribable numbers” of tame sacred snakes in the Hueda kingdom that lived and slept with the natives and would not harm them unless

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provoked. "If any Christian should be unlucky enough, either drunk or sober, to kill a snake, he would scarcely get away with his life if the Negroes should see it."²⁶

Des Marchais, who visited the Slave Coast for the last time in 1725, was the first writer to expound on the snake priestesses, who would become a favoured subject of Ouidah visitors. He claimed that young girls were "abducted" every year by vixenish elderly priestesses to be trained as votaries, but conceded that parents often considered it an honour for their children to be consecrated to the snakes. According to Des Marchais, the alleged termagants:

immediately take these children ... to houses where they live, & where there are places to lock up, instruct, & mark [tattoo] these little creatures ... They ... teach them songs & dances which they must know to honor the Snake, & then they mark them ... by cutting their whole body with little iron needles, which make incisions representing flowers, animals, & especially snakes ... These children then appear dressed in speckled black satin which is rather attractive, & which ... shows they are consecrated to the Snake, which earns everyone's respect, & gives them great privileges ...²⁷

After the girls' training, reported by later authors to last either six months or a year, the old priestesses returned them to their parents.^{28/29} According to Des Marchais, the priestesses required the parents to repay them for everything spent on feeding and instructing the girls, who then stayed at home but rejoined their instructors from time to time to rehearse the songs and dances they had learned. When they reached marriageable age, put at 14 or 15 by the Frenchman, they were ceremoniously wedded to the python, which made them full members of the priestess corps. They could also marry men, but Des Marchais said the girls' privileged status tended to make them vexatious spouses:

[They] drive their husbands crazy when men are found who are mad enough to burden themselves with this kind of woman, for they are haughty to the highest degree; insolent, lazy, they obey only when it pleases them, do only what they wish & regard their husbands as their slaves rather than their masters, who don't dare give them any orders, scold or threaten them, still less chastise them; if they did, they could expect to see a cloud of these shrews sweep down on them, who, sticks in hand, would teach them not to do it again, & they would be happy it didn't cost them their life ... [Their] poor husband is obliged to revere

them, to serve them, to speak to them on his knees, to let them live as suits their fancy, & abandon everything in the house to them; ... In spite of that, it's rare that they don't find a husband, especially when they are beautiful.³⁰

Given the male supremacy that reigned in West Africa (and the rest of the world) at the time, Des Marchais's testimony is remarkable even if obviously exaggerated. Oddly, it brings to mind descriptions of elite female troops, the so-called amazons of Dahomey, who survived the French conquest of the kingdom in 1892 and married. They were said to have preserved "a certain bellicose temper ... directed especially against their husbands", "beat up men who dared to affront them" and "inspired fear among their co-wives as well as in their husband".³¹

According to Capt. Snelgrave, when Dahomey conquered Ouidah, the victors killed, broiled and ate all the sacred serpents they could find,³² but by the time of Pruneau de Pommegorge, who first served at Ouidah's French fort around 1748, local python adoration had been fully restored, apparently with the approval of the Dahomeans themselves.³³ In fact, Agaja, the very king who defeated the Hueda and who ruled until his death in 1840, was credited by Norris with "tolerating his new subjects with the free exercise of their various superstitions". They were, he wrote, "abundantly thankful to him, for permitting them to continue in the enjoyment of their *snake-worship*".³⁴ Robin Law notes that Dahomean monarchs traditionally "pursued a systematic policy, when conquests were made, of 'purchasing' the local religious cults ... Although this policy is explained as a means of securing the support of the *vodun* [deity] appropriated, presumably it also served to secure the allegiance of their human followers."³⁵

Besides the royal python, another divinity caught the attention of European visitors to Ouidah. Capt. Phillips said he often saw "little figures of clay about [residents'] houses, with oil, rice, corn, and other offerings before them" in 1694.³⁶ But it was not until Pruneau de Pommegorge's book came out nearly a century later that the cause of European interest became clear. The Dahomeans, he wrote, have "a Priapic god, crudely made of earth with its principal attribute, which is enormous and exaggerated in proportion to the rest of the body. Women principally make sacrifices to it, each according to her devoteness & the request she has to make to him."³⁷

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John Duncan, a Scottish explorer who spent several months at Ouidah in 1845, reported that the inhabitants “worship images ... more disgusting than in any other part of Africa that I have yet visited. The form is meant to represent a human figure ... It is formed of clay, as large as life, and is placed in all the most public parts of the town. The lower parts of the body ... are out of proportion large, and are exposed in the most disgusting manner.”³⁸ This prudishness, unexpected in macho European adventurers, may help explain the relative scarcity of such details.

Richard F. Burton, the famous British explorer who visited Dahomey in 1863–4, appears to have been taken aback too, but he did not shy from detail, and was apparently the first writer to identify the divinity. Legba, he wrote:

is a horrid spectacle. A mass of red clay is roughly moulded ... into an imitation man, who is evidently, like Jupiter,

A devil of a god for following the girls.

The figure is at squat, crouched, as it were, before its own attributes, with arms longer than a gorilla's, huge feet, and no legs to speak of. The head is of mud or wood, rising conically to an almost pointed poll; a dab of clay represents the nose; the mouth is a gash from ear to ear, and the eyes and teeth are of cowries, or painted ghastly white. This deity almost fills a temple of dwarf thatch, open at the sides ... Legba is of either sex, but rarely feminine. Of the latter I have seen a few, which are even more horrid than the male; the breasts project like the halves of a German sausage, and the rest is to match ... The peculiar worship of Legba consists of propitiating his or her characteristics by unctions of palm-oil [to promote childbirth].³⁹

J. Alfred Skertchly, a British entomologist who followed Burton to Dahomey in 1871, wrote a book in which he tried to outdo his predecessor on many points, including Legba. He more or less copied Burton in describing the statues, including “the special attributes developed to an ungainly size”, but elaborated on the way the randy deity was fed. “When a person wishes to increase his family”, Skertchly reported, his offerings included a mixture of fermented cornmeal dough, palm oil and water placed in “a flat saucer of red earthenware” in front of the image, and a live fowl given to the Legba priest. The priest killed the bird, emptied its blood on both the idol and the suppliant, then ate its roasted flesh himself.⁴⁰

Alfred Burdon Ellis, a British army officer who became an ethnologist of West Africa, predictably termed Legba “a phallic divinity ... whose principal attribute is the exciting of sexual desires”, including erotic dreams, and who thereby “remove[d] barrenness”.⁴¹ But he also described Legba as “the god of discord, who delights to make mischief and foment quarrels”, a role that scholars would later equate with the trickster of West African mythology.⁴²

Burton saw a resemblance to the Greek god Pan because of Legba’s lustfulness, but neither he nor any other Western observer before the twentieth century was aware of the multifarious and powerful position of Legba in the local pantheon. Legba did resemble Pan (and its Roman counterpart, Faunus) but more importantly he also evoked Hermes (and Rome’s Mercury). He was, in fact, the official linguist, messenger and spokesman of all the gods. The Dahomeans believed in a supreme, androgynous God named Mawu-Lisa, with Mawu, the female component, predominating. As the youngest of her seven children, Legba was spoiled. None of his brothers had authority over him, and he was never punished. He alone could mediate “among the gods, between the gods and mankind, among humans, and even among the many forces that bring humans into being”.⁴³ “All beings, humans and gods, [had to] address themselves to him before they [could] approach God.”⁴⁴ Since he was believed to cause nearly all illnesses and accidents, humans carefully avoided offending him.⁴⁵ This explains the ubiquity of the god in eighteenth-century Ouidah.

Melville J. Herskovits, American pioneer of sub-Saharan African studies, in a classic 1938 work on the kingdom of Dahomey, detailed both the sexual and spiritual aspects of Legba. At an Abomey ceremony honouring the deity, he watched a young dancing priestess representing Legba produce a wooden phallus from under her raffia skirt. It was “apparently attached in such a way that it would remain in the horizontal position of the erect male organ, and as she danced ... she made motions of masturbation”. As she approached a large group of female spectators, they ran away, “shrieking with laughter ... Had they stood their ground, Legba would have seized one of them and simulated sexual intercourse.” The priestess danced on, “in exaggerated mimicry of sexual connection”.⁴⁶

But Herskovits also focuses on the broader significance of Legba. Though feared because, as a divine trickster, he often works mischief:

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the dominant Dahomean attitude toward him is not one of fear, but of affection ... Like all supernatural Dahomean forces, he can be beneficent as well as malevolent. More than any other deity, ... he must be worshipped by all regardless of cult affiliation, for as messenger of all the other gods and their spokesman, he is the one to be propitiated if a request is to be granted by a supernatural force; he alone has the power to set aside certain misadventures in the destiny of a person, and the power, also, to add to them.⁴⁷

Lest African superstitions incline the Western reader to feel superior, one should not forget the many millions of Westerners who still take astrology and soothsaying seriously. Bettany Hughes reminds us that in the heyday of ancient Greek democracy, Athens “was occupied by many gods ... neglected at [one’s] peril”, the “Earth ... was inhabited by spirits, typically malign”, and demons and black magic infected the Athenian legal system.⁴⁸

ABSON'S ORIGINS

If the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, his employer for 36 years, kept any records of Abson's pre-African life, they have vanished. The period before 1767 is a documentary blank, and Abson never talks about his life in England in the many reports and letters that have survived.

I began my search for his life before Ouidah thousands of miles from England. Having heard of the Mormon Genealogical Database in Salt Lake City, I googled it. To my surprise and delight, it records a Lionel Abson who was christened at Darfield, Wath-upon-Dearne, South Yorkshire, on either 20 August or 20 October 1735. Moreover, all the Absons in the database for the eighteenth century are located in South Yorkshire, some 150 miles north of London.

I then turned for help to archivists in that area, who found the date of 20 October 1735 for "Lionel the son of Lionel Abson of Billingley" in the Darfield register. Further research disclosed that Lionel Sr. married Faith Andrews in 1728. They had four children, all baptized in Darfield: James in 1733, Lionel in 1735, Martha in 1738 and John in 1742.

Lionel Sr. is recorded in the "poll book" (a list of voters and how they voted) for the 1741 election of a member of Parliament to represent the county of Yorkshire. This means he was relatively affluent since suffrage was then property-based and very narrow. That meshes with evidence from the writings preserved at the British National Archives in the London suburb of Kew that Lionel Jr. was fairly well educated.

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On the other hand, a Lionel Abson married a Priscilla Wilkinson in Bolton, East Riding, Yorkshire, in 1752. If this was Lionel Jr., he would have been only 17 years old, and one wonders how much of a formal education he could have had. There is also a puzzling record of a girl named Faith identified as the daughter of Lionel and who was buried in Bolton in 1751. Absons can still be found in the Bolton area—several were buried in the local cemetery in the twentieth century.

Another snippet of possible evidence, this from the “hearth tax” returns for 1672, is that a John Abson of Hemsworth, West Yorkshire, owned a house with three hearths. Conceivably Lionel Jr.’s younger brother John was named after this successful man.

For me, the clinching proof of Lionel Abson’s South Yorkshire origins turned up in five documents at the Kew archives, four dating to 1783 and one to 1784. On 26 September 1783, he mentions a brother of his who brought a message from Governor Miles. In another of 18 October, Abson reports receiving a letter from his brother John. On 19 December he tells Miles that he had “paid Debts of yours to John Abson”. On 30 December he refers to several letters from Miles that John had delivered to him from Cape Coast Castle. And in the fifth reference, dated 1 January 1784, Abson says he had frequently written to his brother for medical advice and medicines “but he is Negligent & does not send me any thing”, which suggests that John was a ship’s surgeon.¹ This indicates that John, then about 41, had followed his brother into the slave trade, and that Lionel had kept in touch with at least one member of his English family. (Incidentally, a fellow Yorkshireman was William Wilberforce.)

So we can say with some assurance that Lionel Abson was about 32 when he landed at Ouidah, about 35 when he took over the English fort, and about 68 when he died and was buried there, having spent more than half his life in that Slave Coast emporium.

Yorkshiremen are reputed to be unusually thrifty. If true, Abson would appear to have fitted the mould with his recurrent complaints about what he considered inflated prices demanded by African merchants for slaves, ivory, food and other local products. In what may have been his initial report as fort chief cited earlier, he bemoaned the fact that “Corn is very dear”.² Twelve years later he reported that the price of ivory was so high that “nobody shows me it” because he lacked

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highly valued goods like silk and coral to pay for the tusks. In three years, he said, he had not managed to weigh as much as 500 lb of ivory from merchants.³

Abson also grumbled frequently about unpaid debts owed him by Dahomean officials from the king down, which he said kept him from paying his own debts, a shortcoming that seemed genuinely to prey on his mind. It was one of the reasons he despised King Kpengla. "I am sorry to own my inability to pay you", he wrote to a slave-ship captain, "from the few or no Slaves the King has within these four years paid me."⁴ He apologized to another that he couldn't pay him what he owed because he had not been able to collect a debt from a Yovogan who had been "decollated" (beheaded).⁵ In a letter to Miles, he listed everything Dahomeans owed him, mainly in terms of slaves, and vowed to "set to Work all my Ingenuity to get the most out of their Hands".⁶ The late Nigerian historian Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin, no admirer of Abson, acknowledged that his "fortune was completely ruined by the help he had given, over a period of years, to needy Dahomeans", and calculated his debts at "hardly . . . much less than £16,000" in eighteenth-century money.⁷ Abson also complained often about debts owed him by French and Portuguese officials and merchants.

Yorkshireman or not, it may all have been simply a mundane matter of conscientious bookkeeping counteracted by his own generosity.

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Records of activities at William's Fort were kept in "Day Books" covering varying periods during the year. Many have survived. We know from one that Abson began his career in Ouidah on 1 June 1767 as a factor with an annual salary of £80. Pay for his first month was precisely $106\frac{2}{3}$ lb of cowries. This compared with monthly earnings of 200 lb of the shells for the fort chief, Archibald Dalzel, who had arrived only a few weeks earlier and who a quarter-century later would author the major eighteenth-century book on Dahomey. The tiny fort staff included a surgeon with the same wage as Abson, and a sergeant and gunner with smaller incomes.¹

Despite his subsequent stamina, Abson showed no immunity to the maladies that killed most white newcomers to West Africa. In an undated letter apparently written between October 1767 and March 1768, Dalzel said both Abson and the surgeon "have been almost Constantly ill since my Arrival. Mr Abson is not quite out of Danger yet ... The Serjeant & Gunner have likewise been ill."²

In fact, Abson may have had physical complaints throughout his life in Africa. In his correspondence with Richard Miles in the early 1780s, the most copious and candid exchanges that have survived, Abson complains several times about attacks of "fever" and "flux", which suggests chronic malaria and dysentery. He speaks of feeling "very poorly", having a "bad state of health", being "out of Order a long time" and "decay-

ing very fast”, suffering “a Fever ... that ... makes me every day weaker”. One of his complaints was haemorrhoids, which he called “Piles” and blamed for “an habitual flux”. He asked Miles more than once to get him a “Clyster Pipe” from England, a device used to administer a tobacco-smoke enema. (The contraption dated back to the seventeenth century, and is said to have been hailed by King James I (1603–25), an opponent of smoking more than three centuries ahead of his time, as the only way to take tobacco.) I’ve found no evidence that Abson ever got his wish.³

In the same letter reporting Abson’s initial illness, Dalzel lamented the “very Ruinous Condition” in which he had found William’s Fort. “The face of one of the Bastions”, he wrote, had

tumbled down, the Cook Room ... [was] a Heap of Rubbish, many of the Buildings [lacked] Thatch, the Moat [was] almost filled up in many places, & scarce [*sic*] a Gun Carriage [was] in good Order ... We are under continual Apprehensions on Account of the Forts being set on Fire either by Accident or purposely.” Dalzel proposed replacing thatch with tiles, and suggested that the Company Committee “send a few Thousands by every Liverpool Vessel that comes here.”⁴

None would ever be delivered.

A bit later Dalzel conceded that

Repairs of this Fort have been & will ever continue to be a very troublesome and expensive job, any Tornado [storm], every Shower of Rain, is sure to make Work for us; and altho’ I keep the Companys Slaves very closely employed, yet I find they are insufficient to thatch the Buildings as fast as they are stript, and to rebuild the Walls as fast as they fall ... The Fort is ... much too large and we have all the Companys Slaves and a great many free People within the Walls, which is a great inconvenience nothing being safe in the Fort.

Dalzel’s proposed solution was to build a much smaller fort entirely of brick and with few African inhabitants on the grounds of the old one. This project too came to naught.⁵

After waiting six months, Dalzel wrote to the Committee that if they couldn’t accept his building plan, they should at least send him a Newsham fire engine, an eighteenth-century British invention so effective that it remained in use almost to the end of the nineteenth.⁶ His request was futile. In early 1770 a fire broke out in William’s Fort. It

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was so extensive that slaves of the French and Portuguese forts joined the resident slaves and local townspeople to help put it out. The king of Dahomey ordered Ouidah authorities to help repair the damage.⁷ This disaster may have been a last straw for Dalzel, who gave up his job and left for England in August 1770.⁸

As we have seen, Dalzel's immediate successor, Erasmus Williams, died after six weeks, and Abson replaced him. His advancement was not automatic: he was acting chief for several months until the Committee gave its formal approval. In November 1770 the Cape Coast Castle governor, David Mill, and his Council, which shared authority over the English forts, unanimously recommended to the Committee Abson's appointment as chief at Ouidah. They cited his seniority at William's Fort, where his three years' experience "must [have] acquainted [him] with the Manners & Customs of the Natives there as well at least as any other". On the other hand, they opposed Abson's appointment to the Council, which apparently had been suggested by the Committee itself. The Council included some senior fort chiefs, whereas Abson would become "the Youngest Chief in the Service", outranked in seniority and experience by at least four others. Besides, Mill wrote, "the great distance of Whydah from this Place, & the little intercourse between us would effectively prevent his being of any Service".⁹ Ouidah was actually only some 220 nautical miles from Cape Coast Castle, but the proximity of most other English forts in West Africa to the castle, owing to their location on the Gold Coast, did give them an advantage that Abson was never happy about. He did not, however, ever show interest in joining the Council though later in his career he would admittedly covet the post of Cape Coast Castle governor, who was the Council's presiding officer.¹⁰

Heading a European fort at Ouidah during the eighteenth century was a high-risk job. It has been calculated that all together, 19 English, French and Portuguese fort directors died, including two and possibly three who were killed. In addition, 15 were expelled by Dahomean authorities.¹¹

The most agonizing death, one that Abson was surely aware of, was reportedly suffered by an Englishman named Charles Testefole, who made the mistake of siding with Dahomey's foes. As recounted by Snelgrave, following its conquest of Ouidah and the Hueda in 1727, Dahomey had been invaded by a rising Yoruba power, the empire of

Oyo. Testefole, thinking Dahomey had been seriously weakened by Oyo attacks, encouraged the king of the Hueda, who had fled his country, to return. The Hueda reoccupied Ouidah in 1729, but their victory was short-lived. The Dahomeans reconquered the town, and Testefole allowed the Hueda king to take refuge in the English fort, then persuaded him to escape Ouidah under cover of night. Soon thereafter the Englishman further antagonized the king of Dahomey, Agaja, by whipping a Dahomean notable and declaring he would do the same to the king if he could.

According to Snelgrave, Agaja ordered his people to capture Testefole when an opportunity arose. The Englishman imprudently obliged him by venturing some distance from William's Fort to socialize with a French trader. Dahomeans on the lookout for the English governor broke into the Frenchman's factory and seized Testefole. After extracting a large sham ransom for him that was sent from the fort, they

made his Body fast to stakes drove in the Ground: Where, spreading him on his Belly, they with sharp Knives cut open his Arms, Back, Thighs and Legs in several places, and filled the Wounds with a mixture of Limejuice, Salt and Pepper ...; which put him to Inexpressible Torment. However, they soon after put him out of his pain, by cutting off his Head. Then they cut his Body in pieces, broiled them on ... Coals, and [ate] them.

They later told some Portuguese that "*English Beef* was very good". Since cannibalism was not practised in Dahomey, that part of their story could well have been a crude joke. Agaja denied he had ordered Testefole killed, but he never punished the perpetrators.¹² Akinjogbin ignores Snelgrave's gory account and says Testefole was captured, taken to Abomey, sentenced to death and executed.¹³

In taking charge of William's Fort, Abson stepped into Erasmus Williams's shoes, literally as well as figuratively. In what may have been his first letter as chief, he asked Governor Mill "to send some pairs of Shoes, as I am almost barefoot and Mr Williams's are too small for me".¹⁴ This could be a rare clue to Abson's physical appearance, possibly suggesting that he was above average in size. In 1782–3, Abson liked to refer to one of his staff members as "little Stubbs", which may have implied the same. Abson thought Stubbs would "make a good Man if he lives",¹⁵ but he seems not to have survived much more than a year.

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Abson's 1770 letter also touched on more important problems that, with one exception, would hound him throughout his tenure. As already noted, to pay his fort's slaves on time, he had to borrow cowries from the head of the French fort. He thought William's Fort was in better shape than it had been for years, but still had to direct slaves to restore the roof thatch, and procure coconut timbers to shore up the moat bridge, which was "in a very bad Condition". He complained about a serious lack of medicines, including calomel. And he reported four recent raids by Dahomey's foes on the Ouidah beach, a recurring problem since Agaja's time (and one that Abson himself would, as we shall see, soon help resolve). The raiders, called "Popoes", were either from the coastal town of Grand Popo, about 20 miles west of Ouidah, or one 20 miles farther west called Little Popo, and were allies of Hueda exiles.¹⁶ They burned or stole every canoe on the beach, including the only one owned by William's Fort; robbed a French ship captain of his goods and a Portuguese captain of his slaves; and abducted three white men from tents that Europeans commonly set up on the beach as temporary shelters for their merchandise.

Abson's British staff would always be tiny in number. In addition to two or three soldiers, he usually had a factor, who earned £80 a year, which was increased to £100 by 1801, and very occasionally a surgeon. The doctor who reached Ouidah the same time as Abson was paid £80 but, as we have seen, this was later raised to £100 and, eventually, to Abson's level, £150, apparently to little avail. Abson's experience with surgeons was sometimes depressing. He described one surgeon named George Ormsby, who stayed less than a year in 1780–1 as "a drunken Sot" and "a dishonest Man ... very capable of Mischief when he sets on to be bad ... His Aim was to be my Master."¹⁷ He found Dr Ettrick a dandy who liked to dress in silk and was "too idle for any thing, except tying his own Hair & false [pony-] tail on". Abson also "wonder[ed] at his meanness [*sic*]" toward a fellow staffer, that "show[ed] his bad Disposition".¹⁸

Doctors were not the only failures. A Cape Coast Castle staff member, James Hogg, was transferred to Ouidah as a factor even though, or maybe because, his writing was "scarcely legible, and when an Officer in this Castle, [he] was remarkable for inattention to his Duty in the Accountants Office".¹⁹

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Unlike the white staffers, Majerrican, Abson's faithful "linguist", seems to have received small pay raises in the 36 years he worked with the Yorkshireman. In 1779 he earned £9 and in 1801 £12.²⁰ (This compares with the £36 annually for a British soldier.) His salary was paid in cowries and liquor (which he could and probably did resell at a profit, at least in part). In 1801, for example, he received 60 lb of cowries and 12 gallons of brandy. His income was frequently augmented by what was termed "Subsistence and Dispatch", an allowance for official travel (undertaken even by Dahomean visitors to William's Fort). Abson would sometimes send him to Abomey alone for royal business, and at least once sent him to Cape Coast Castle at the king's request to tell the British governor what Dahomey wanted from England. The king was Kpengla, whom Abson despised, yet the Briton paid for that trip too. In 1779 the standard payment for Majerrican's trips was 5 lb of cowries and a half-gallon of rum.²¹

The fort's white soldiers were usually assisted by three black ones, including a "Bomboy" whose duties, not described in surviving documents, had previously been handled by a British sergeant. The bomboy was the highest-paid Company slave, along with a "Boatswain of Canoemen". When the fort had a canoe, which was frequently not the case, six slaves acted as ordinary canoemen. (European slavers routinely brought canoes and their crews from the Gold Coast to Ouidah to deal with the heavy surf.) Usually, nearly half the male slaves were common labourers, beginning at age nine, but the rest had special skills. As many as four at a time were blacksmiths and two were carpenters. There was always a sawyer, often a cook, and sometimes a cooper, bricklayer,²² cowherd or fisherman. Two "Hall Servants" may have acted like house slaves of the antebellum American South.

Female slaves of William's Fort were largely untrained. Nearly all were labelled "Labouresses", and the youngest so described were seven years old. The only specialists were "Washerwomen", no more than two at a time.

Day Books not only listed the slaves' occupations but named them (one name only), gave their ages and summed up their physical state. The oldest were described as "superannuated", a condition which began as early as 55 for women and 56 for men. The oldest man listed in surviving records was 61 and the oldest woman 78. Some slaves were

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lame, some “sickly” or “infirm”, one half-blind, but the great majority were rated as “healthy”.

Total annual wages for the slaves increased gradually from £308 in 1775 to £448 in 1790 and 1801, despite ups and downs in their number. The highest figure was, it should be noted, only three times Abson’s yearly salary, divided among anywhere from 61 to 78 persons. The slaves were at first paid with cowries only; in 1779 they received 5,436 lb of the shell money. By 1801, part was paid in liquor; in that year the slaves received 2,242½ lb of cowries and 448½ gallons of brandy.

One of Abson’s unbidden, routine duties was warning English visitors not to harm pythons, the cherished sacred snakes of Ouidah, lest the inhabitants take revenge. Europeans were no longer put to death for it, but risked expulsion from Dahomey.

* * *

In 1772, only two years into his headship, Abson was responsible for a unique achievement by a white in the two-and-a-half-century history of the Dahomean kingdom: negotiating a peace settlement between it and an African enemy, in this case the Popos. Historians have overlooked the singularity of this event.

Robert Norris, who spent 18 years in the slave trade and has been called by Robin Law “the first European historian of Dahomey”,²³ had this to say about Abson’s role:

In 1772, a peace was happily concluded, under the mediation of *Lionel Abson*, Esq. governor of *William’s Fort*, to the mutual advantage of both parties: who after forty years of war, now enjoy the profits and pleasures of undisturbed commerce and social intercourse [*sic*]. This able governor bestows so much attention on this affair, and is so circumspect on the transactions of both parties, by whom he is equally respected, and acknowledged to be an impartial umpire between them; that whilst he continues to superintend them, a firm peace may probably continue.²⁴

Robin Law explains that Popo raiders had occupied the Ouidah beach for a month, cutting communications between the town and ships offshore. King Tegbesu (1740–74) sent the main Dahomean army to protect Ouidah, and “enlisted ... Abson ... to negotiate peace”.²⁵ Akinjogbin, who tended to play down Abson’s role, acknowledged nevertheless that Tegbesu “bluntly asked Lionel Abson ... to help him

to make peace with the Popo”, and that “Abson’s reputation was very high in the 1770s as a result of his part in the peace of 1772”.²⁶

Though Abson must have detailed his achievement in reports to his boss at Cape Coast Castle or to the Committee in London, none seem to have survived. The evidence is found in banal day-book references to presents routinely given to Dahomean visitors to William’s Fort. On 10 March 1772, Abson gave five gallons of brandy to the Gau, Dahomey’s army commander, who had come down from Abomey with troops to protect Ouidah. On 29 April he gave 25 lb of cowries and a gallon of brandy to Tegbesu’s messengers, known as “half-heads” because they shaved one side of their scalps, and a messenger from the Mehu, the second-ranking chief under the king, responsible for finance and commerce. They came down, Abson reported, “to desire me to assist him [the Mehu] in making a peace with the Popoes”. And on 13 July the Mehu himself arrived “with full power from the King ... to settle all differences with the Popoes.” Abson presented him with an expensive Indian cloth (a pullicat) and 24 gallons of brandy.²⁷

(The king’s half-heads and the often multiple messengers of other high-ranking officials came from Abomey to Ouidah so frequently, often on slim pretexts, that the cowries and liquor they always received from Abson, and most likely the other governors as well, must have been a strong incentive. Usually the messages could have been delivered by a single person. It was a way, one of many indulged in, to milk the Europeans.)

Of the dozens of European fort directors, none but Abson was recruited by a Dahomean monarch for peacemaking. Tegbesu, who had ruled his country for 32 years (and would die two years later), must have been unusually impressed by the young Englishman. Their interests converged—restoring the slave trade disrupted by the Popos—but such disruptions were not uncommon and no other Dahomean king had ever asked, or would ever ask, for such help.

Tegbesu returned Abson’s favour within months by sending his people to William’s Fort to re-thatch damaged roofs on two occasions, at least one involving a fire. Again, we know this from gifts disbursed to the Dahomeans who took part. The king himself received 10 pieces of silk, two gold-laced hats and 96 gallons of rum for his pains.²⁸

Tegbesu was succeeded by his son Kpengla (1774–89), a man whom, as we have seen, Abson came to detest. Their association seems

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to have been amicable at least until early 1777, when Abson gave Kpengla, in memory of his father, two pieces of silk, six half-barrels of gunpowder, eight Dane guns and 32 gallons of rum.²⁹ Some time between then and 1782, their relations deteriorated, though never to the point of expulsion reached by 15 other fort directors in eighteenth-century Dahomey. Abson did not, of course, in his direct dealings with Kpengla, resort to the sort of racist outburst quoted in the Introduction, but he did tell Miles in the same letter that he had “been as saucy as him twice” in meetings, and was “once threatned [*sic*] by him what he would do to me for it”. He also told Miles he was “heartily tired” of Ouidah though he had passed “Agreeable Times” there and “would not have exchanged [it] for any fort had not this King been of the Disposition he is viz [namely] Insolent & besides he overbearing[ly] commands from you what he knows you have bye you [like the uniform hanger mentioned in Chapter 2] with that Impudence not to be borne”.³⁰ Abson also complained that the king, for up to six years, had not kept promises to pay off debts owed him by two deceased Yovogans. Another unpaid debt was incurred by the king himself: as a young prince he had sold a man into slavery in Brazil “for being too inquisitive”, and Abson had redeemed the fellow after 24 years of servitude, apparently at Kpengla’s request.³¹ Abson summed up Kpengla as “a vile Negroe. I was in hopes he would have mended but I think he gets worse than ever.”³²

Nine months later, in another letter to Miles, Abson, worried that silks destined as a gift for Kpengla during the Annual Customs ceremony, would not arrive in time. “This King”, he warned:

is by no Means to be played with & I should not be surprised if he did not like what I carried up [to Abomey], that he would take an Opportunity before the 2 other [fort] Chiefs French & Portugeuze & on some publick Day before all the People of ye Country of giving me some of his Impudence, which hitherto I have always beat off, with Arguments as impudent as his own. In the humour I am in with him we may easily come to a Rupture. I sent him word...to send me down my Slaves & that I would leave his Country, for he had the Insolence to tell me while I was here [in Ouidah], no English Ship would come more to his Port ... You must own its hard to be under the lash of a Vile Negroe.”³³

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A bit later he referred to him as “this Black Tyrant”.³⁴

Years later Abson labelled Kpengla a “hellish monster” for his behaviour at the Annual Customs of 1779, where the Englishman witnessed the execution of five young African women from other parts. He said Kpengla publicly explained they had been captured in war, “domesticated” in his family and treated as his wives, but escaped to their homeland and were eventually brought back to Abomey. Death, he said, according to Abson, was “the proper reward for their ingratitude”. When female executioners with cutlasses botched the job, Kpengla showed them how to behead the victims. “Not that way,” Abson quoted him as saying, “—hold your cutlass thus—give it to me—’tis so—imagine you are chopping wood.”³⁵ Despite their mutual hostility, Abson’s diplomatic self-restraint, and Kpengla’s too, apparently prevailed during the king’s 15-year reign.

Unluckily for Abson, during nine of those years, 1777–86, he also had to put up with perhaps the least sympathetic of all his fellow fort directors, a self-important Frenchman who signed himself Ollivier Montagüere.³⁶ Kpengla lived sixty miles from Ouidah and, obeying a royal taboo, never visited the coast, but the English and French forts were, as mentioned, just a musket shot apart. At the very least, Abson had to dine with Ollivier Montagüere once a month, but their meetings must have been more frequent because the Frenchman enlisted English (and Portuguese) assistance for his private slave-trading though in reality he was an anglophobe. Ollivier Montagüere was clearly unhappy with the peaceful tripartite European competition at Ouidah, its truce imposed by local rulers. He recommended to Paris that the French move to Porto-Novo, a slaving port about 40 miles east of Ouidah (and now capital of the Benin Republic), and keep the English and Portuguese out.³⁷

Abson was aware of Ollivier Montagüere’s prejudice against the English though probably not to the degree revealed by the Frenchman’s correspondence with Paris. In his letters to Miles, in which he always referred to his French counterpart as Ollivier, Abson called him “a busy meddling old fellow who takes every Method to trouble us” and “a bad Man [who] would doe [*sic*] all that lay in his Power to molest us”.³⁸ Concerning a trading deal, he wrote: “I doubt not but ... Ollivier will make some Difficultys [*sic*] of paying me.”³⁹ Miles himself was importuned by Ollivier Montagüere, and finally found him “so little disposed

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to be pleased with any thing that is done for him ... that really I do not wish to have any more of his commerce".⁴⁰

The French government was not as tolerant of private slave-trading by its agents as the Company, and in fact investigated Montaguère's involvement after his departure from Ouidah.⁴¹ Gourg, who succeeded him, observed that France continued to outrank England and Portugal at all Dahomean ceremonies and with the king himself, "but otherwise M. Ollivier Montaguere sacrificed [that advantage] to his commercial interests".⁴² He was, it would seem, more interested in personal enrichment than in running the French fort.

In his report to the Minister of the Navy and the Colonies advocating new French initiatives at Porto-Novo (and at several other places on the African coast), written after he left Ouidah, he changed his surname to Ollivier de Montaguère, imprudently awarding himself a noble "de" just three years before the French Revolution. (It's not clear why Montaguère was changed to Montaguère, but it does seem a bit more aristocratic. A successor, Deniau (or Denyau) de la Garenne, would do the reverse, dropping his apparently legitimate "de la Garenne" to become just plain Citizen Deniau after the Revolution.) Montaguère asked the minister to receive him in Paris for further instruction on French opportunities in Africa, and offered to return to Africa to fulfil them.⁴³ The minister's reaction is not recorded.

Like Abson, Montaguère had an African "wife" and children. A "*mulâtresse*" named Sophie gave him two sons. When the Frenchman left Ouidah, he "entrusted" Sophie to Kpengla, traditionally described as his friend. And when Kpengla died, Sophie was shifted to the harem of his successor, Agonglo.⁴⁴ We'll meet her again later in our story.

Abson had no better luck with some of his own staff members, but unlike Montaguère they didn't stay around very long. As we've seen, two doctors were particularly unappreciated by their boss, even though physicians were rarely assigned to William's Fort.

One of the problems Abson faced in his early years in Ouidah was caused by the American Revolution. As mentioned earlier, it reduced transatlantic trade in rum, a standard component of payments of all sorts to Dahomeans. The Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa partly made up the shortage of Caribbean rum with English brandy. On 16 September 1783, just 13 days after America and Britain signed a

peace treaty in Paris, the Company Committee issued its order to African posts not to deal in North American rum, meaning New England's output. Instead, it resolved that "30,000 Gallons or upwards of British Brandy be this Year sent out in the Store-ship for the use of the Forts and Settlements in Africa".⁴⁵

The American Revolution had another, quite indirect repercussion on William's Fort. From the early seventeenth century to the Revolution, England sent convicts to North America to ease the overcrowding of its gaols. The rebellion of the American colonists forced the English to look elsewhere. One of the alternative destinations they found for what was called "penal transportation" was the island of Gorée off Senegal, seized from the French in 1779. Prisoners sent there were soldiers convicted of crimes. Under the terms of the Anglo-American peace treaty worked out in Paris in early 1783, Gorée was to be restored to France. The British government told the Company that the convicts, "who in consequence of Crimes they have committed have been sentenced to remain upon the Coast of Africa either for a number of Years or during their Natural Lives", would be taken to Cape Coast Castle. The Committee was told to order the Cape Coast Castle governor (Richard Miles) to receive the men into Company service.⁴⁶ Miles apparently decided to send six of them to Ouidah.

The convicts reached William's Fort by March 1783, but one died the day they arrived. The other five immediately caused problems for Abson. Food for whites was in short supply, and so was medicine. Two of the five died by July. Cowries were not available for the survivors' wages. Abson's reaction was apparently distress, not anger. "The poor Convicts", he wrote Miles, "have regularly shared at meals with me ever since their falling sick and with all my Assistance they are in Debt for you know they arrived naked" (presumably meaning without funds or possessions besides minimal clothing, like slaves on the Middle Passage). At the end of 1783 the three were still alive, but convicts are not mentioned again in surviving documents, and the three probably succumbed.⁴⁷

Some time during Kpengla's reign (1774–89), a meeting between him and Abson produced a report that is still cited by students of the Atlantic slave trade. The report was carried in Dalzel's 1793 *History of Dahomy*. Abson is said to have shown the king English pamphlets for and against the trade and orally translated them into Fon for his benefit. Kpengla reacted with a rather clever two-hour "speech" defending

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Dahomey's role in the trade,⁴⁸ of which Abson quoted portions. Since both Dalzel and Abson supported the trade, the story has been questioned. A noted British Africanist, John D. Fage, in his introduction to the 1967 reprint of Dalzel's book, even wondered whether Kpengla's speech "was actually made and, if so, whether it was truthfully reported".⁴⁹ But understanding Abson as we now do, I find it hard to believe he made up the account, though he could well have influenced the king's response through his choice of abolitionist material to translate. In fact, knowing his detestation of Kpengla, one might even argue that he showed remarkable restraint.

According to Abson, Kpengla insisted that Dahomey went to war not to supply English ships with slaves but to resist incursions by hostile neighbours and punish their depredations on a continent where warfare was endemic. "[N]o Dahoman man", he maintained:

ever embarked in war merely for the sake of procuring wherewithal to purchase your commodities ... When policy or justice requires that men be put to death, neither silk, nor coral, nor brandy, nor cowries, can be accepted as substitutes for the blood that ought to be spilt for example sake. Besides, if white men chuse [*sic*] to remain at home, ... will black men cease to make war? I answer, by no means. And if there be no ships to receive their captives, ... they will be put to death ...

Kpengla cited an early ruler of Dahomey who killed all his prisoners before there was a market for slaves. "What else could he have done with them?" asked the king. "Was he to let them remain in his country, to cut the throats of his subjects?"

Kpengla condemned what he called malicious, false allegations in English books that Dahomeans sold their wives and children "for the sake of procuring a few kegs of brandy". He acknowledged that "part" of his prisoners were sold to white men, which, he said, "we have a right so to do. Are not all prisoners at the disposal of their captors? And are we to blame if we send delinquents to a far country? I have been told, you do the same [an obvious reference to penal transportation]."

Regarding human sacrifice at the Annual Customs, Kpengla claimed it gave "grandeur" to the ceremonies and made his enemies fear him. "Besides," he added:

if I should neglect this indispensable duty, would my ancestors suffer me to live? Would they not trouble me day and night, and say, that I sent

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nobody to serve them; that I was only solicitous about my own name, and forgetful of my ancestors? . . . The few that can be spared from this necessary celebration, we sell to the white men. And happy, no doubt, are such, when they find themselves on the path for [Ouidah], to be disposed of to the Europeans. *We shall still [live], say they to themselves; white men will not kill us; and we may even avoid punishment, by serving our new masters with fidelity.*

The slaves sold to Europeans by Dahomeans were hardly “few”—they numbered in the hundreds of thousands. “Delinquents”, meaning convicted criminals, could not have been more than a tiny percentage. And as far as we know, “happy” is not a word European witnesses ever applied to the slaves who were herded to Ouidah for export. I doubt that Abson would have originated such nonsense. Kpengla supported the slave trade as fervently as any white slaver. His remark that all captives would be killed if Europeans stopped buying slaves was just what England’s pro-slaving lobby wanted to hear, and he was well informed enough to know it. He complained to Abson whenever visits by English slave ships tapered off. Four times in 1777–8 Kpengla sent his “half-heads” down to Ouidah “to ask the Reason why Ships did not come [there] as usual”, and in 1780 sent them again “to ask whether or not there is a war [between Europeans], or if it is not a Scheme concerted among the [fort] Chiefs . . . to hinder Ships from Coming [there] to make Trade”. (Such a conspiracy was unimaginable, but there was indeed a war going on, Britain against America and France, which disrupted transatlantic commerce.) In 1785 Kpengla again dispatched his messengers to Ouidah “to demand the Reason that English Ships do not visit [it] as usual”, and the following year they came to ask why “all Ships” were bypassing the port and sailing eastward (doubtless to buy slaves more cheaply elsewhere).⁵⁰

Abson’s interest in Dahomean current events, and his talent in reporting them, were made clear in Dalzel’s book, where the fort chief was credited with the last 75 pages,⁵¹ covering the years from 1774, when Kpengla was enthroned, to 1791, two years into the reign of his successor, Agonglo. Abson said Kpengla blundered in 1775 by arranging “the unmerited disgrace and destruction” of the Yovogan of Ouidah, “a most deserving officer, who had long conducted himself, in a very ticklish post, with the approbation of the Europeans, as well as the natives”. Kpengla later repented, charging two of the Yovogan’s subor-

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dinates with falsely accusing the viceroy of misconduct: criticizing the monarch, and wearing sandals and “ordering a white man’s umbrella to be carried over his head”, two of the king’s prerogatives. Moreover, the Mehu, the second-ranking official below the sovereign, had a hand in the Yovogan’s demise because of a family feud. Abson quoted the king as confessing to him that the Yovogan’s death “was the worse thing [he] ever countenanced”.⁵²

Abson was the first European to report a remarkable infrastructural improvement by the Dahomeans, apparently initiated by Kpengla: the road from Abomey to Ouidah. As transcribed by Dalzel, Abson wrote that in 1779 the king:

ordered all his subjects to set about clearing the paths, giving each caboceer [chief or noble] a string, measuring ten yards, the intended width of the roads. Thus a spacious communication was opened, not only between each town and the capital, but all the way down to the beach. With incredible labour and fatigue, a passage was cut through the wood at *Apo*y [not identified]; the gullies were filled up, and the hurdle bridges, over the swamps, were widened. When this work was completed, the King said, with a vainglorious air, “If any one be desirous of paying me a visit, he shall not have it to say, that thorns or briars impede his march.”⁵³

The writer of Dalzel’s preface hailed the road as “perhaps the most beaten track, by Europeans, of any in Africa”.⁵⁴

Abson’s account led nineteenth-century British writers to liken Kpengla to John L. McAdam, the Scottish inventor of macadam roads,⁵⁵ though that innovation came decades later. The portion of the road from Abomey to Cana, regarded as Dahomey’s second capital, was eventually developed and beautified to a degree that impressed many European visitors, while the major part, from Cana to Ouidah, seems to have been neglected by comparison.⁵⁶

Abson also recounted a signal event in the history of the “amazons” of Dahomey: the first armed engagement of the country’s elite women warriors, and the only one in the eighteenth century of which we can reasonably be sure. He dated it to 1781, but it may have taken place two years earlier. Starting in the 1730s or 1740s and ending in the 1820s, Dahomey paid an annual tribute to the Yoruba empire of Oyo. Abson tells us that Oyo envoys happened to be in Dahomey to collect

the tribute when the aged Mehu died. The envoys saw a chance to increase the payment: they demanded a hundred of the Mehu's women. Kpengla reluctantly handed over some of them to get rid of the Yoruba, but three months later the king of Oyo threatened an invasion if he did not receive the rest.

Unwilling to give up more Dahomean women, Kpengla sent troops to the neighbouring nation of Agouna to seize the requisite number of females. The local leader repulsed the Dahomean forces, inflicting heavy losses. "This news being brought to the King of Dahomy at mid-day," Abson relates, "he immediately got up, girt on his cartouch-box [cartridge case], shouldered his firelock [musket], and marched towards Agoonah, at the head of eight hundred armed women." (In so doing, Kpengla breached a rule established after Agaja, a consummate warrior-king, was wounded, and it was decided to keep Dahomean rulers out of harm's way. They continued to go on campaigns, but stayed well back from the fighting, surrounded by amazons.)

The Agouna forces were routed, and Kpengla received some enemy heads, apparently severed by his female soldiers. He then returned home, and Dahomean male troops hunted down the enemy and captured eighteen hundred of them. Presumably more than enough foreign women were now available for Oyo.⁵⁷

Abson described several other military campaigns ordered by Kpengla, and gave unrestrained vent to his true feelings about the monarch. He credited attacks on inland neighbours to the king's "insatiable thirst after blood, the barbarous vanity of being considered the scourge of mankind, and the savage pomp of dwelling in a house garnished with skulls, and stained with human gore". To these alleged motives he added "a desire for plunder" to explain Dahomean attacks on seaports that had drawn slave ships away from Ouidah and accumulated European goods.⁵⁸

One of the latter targets was the town of Badagry in what became the southwestern corner of Nigeria, now a city with a quarter of a million inhabitants.⁵⁹ Abson told the tale of the Dahomey-Badagry conflict, and others, with the particularity of a professional historian. I shall relate only the salient details.

In 1783 a small party of Dahomeans invaded Badagry beach and seized some royal slaves employed by Europeans to unload their ships.

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They also smashed canoes and carried off a little booty. "This trifling success", according to Abson, persuaded Kpengla to attack the town of Badagry itself. An army led by the Gau, Dahomey's supreme military commander, headed for Badagry a few months later. Their crossing of a "river", in reality a lagoon, between the beach and the town alerted the inhabitants, who ambushed them, killing the deputy army commander and "a great number of soldiers". The Gau managed to regroup his forces and lead "a masterly retreat". Kpengla vowed to avenge the defeat.

Next year, the Gau returned with greater forces and the support of Badagry's neighbours. He "laid waste the whole country in his progress, making many prisoners". "The Badagrees ... resolved to make a desperate push, and sell their liberty and lives as dear as possible." Their dawn attack against the enemy camp surprised the Dahomeans, who suffered heavy losses. But "the coolness and presence of mind" of a Dahomean chief whom the Gau, diverted by religious duties, had left in charge turned the tide. The Gau then resumed command, "giving no quarter, till the Badagrees were reduced to a handful. After this engagement, six thousand heads were sold to the King of Dahomy by his soldiers."

"Great rejoicings followed this conquest." At the next Annual Customs in 1785, "The air resounded with the notable exploits performed by the victorious army ... The officers and soldiers were liberally rewarded by the distribution of cowries and cloth; and the skulls of the vanquished enemy were ordered to be applied to the decoration of the royal walls." The person in charge of this adornment miscalculated the number of skulls the royal palace would need, and thought to solve the problem by widening the spaces between the crania, but Kpengla vetoed the change. Instead, 127 "wretched captives" from Badagry were "slaughtered in cold blood, for this hellish purpose".⁶⁰

Surprisingly, in summing up Kpengla's qualities, Abson conceded that the king "possessed a great share of personal courage" as well as an "enterprising spirit", but "appear[ed] to have been remarkably deficient in every other endowment requisite for the government of a great kingdom".⁶¹ Lest Abson's loathing for Kpengla be considered par for the course, the Englishman seems to have got on extremely well with the king's predecessor, Tegbesu, and tolerably well with his successor, Agonglo, and even with the next one, Adandozan, who would cause him great posthumous damage.

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One of Abson's last run-ins with Kpengla occurred in 1788 and involved five English seamen who were captured by the king's men and held prisoner in Ouidah. Three had been "cast away" from a slave ship, apparently at Badagry, and the other two had "run away" from another one and headed for William's Fort "to lay their grievances" before Abson. He made "frequent applications" to get them all released but the king refused. In a report to Cape Coast Castle, Abson said it was "untellable the hardships they undergoe [*sic*]", and proposed that the seamen be ransomed. By the time his proposal was accepted, one of the captives had starved to death. Cape Coast Castle wrote to Abson: "Your Humanity appears in a very striking Point of View, Pity it is, their [ship] Owners are not possessed of the same Sentiments."⁶²

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A year or two before Kpengla's death, Abson, having passed the age of 50, seems to have begun losing interest in his work. The William's Fort Day Book, which he had been issuing every three months, covered a full year in 1788 (and is missing for 1787). His failure to succeed Richard Miles as Cape Coast Castle governor, an ambition he had expressed to Miles himself at the end of 1783, may have had something to do with his slowing down.¹ The rise of abolitionism in England and France, and a fall-off in the slave trade that particularly affected Ouidah, may also have influenced him.

Kpengla's death from smallpox in April 1789 might have re-energized Abson for a while. In his messages to Cape Coast Castle, as reported to the London Committee, he spoke "very highly" of Kpengla's successor, Agonglo, a son in his early twenties. He said the new king was very different from his father, "being much milder in his Government, and giving every Encouragement and Protection to the Traders".² And he put out two six-month Day Books in 1789 and 1790 instead of an annual one. Since the traders Abson referred to were slavers, this may have been his last-known written expression of support for *la traite*.

But Abson's enthusiasm for Agonglo was short-lived. His congenial French colleague Pierre-Simon Gourg, who apparently shared Abson's opinion of Kpengla,³ was expelled summarily by the new king within

a few months. Abson said Gourg had “become obnoxious to the natives” for alleged “haughty and supercilious behavior” toward traders and chiefs, and reportedly the Frenchman’s “own officers had conspired against him, and had done him ill offices with the King”. Gourg would seem to have ignored some of Abson’s advice that he later credited with saving his life and that gives us a revealing clue to the Yorkshireman’s success in avoiding expulsion under four Dahomean monarchs. Abson said Gourg had not received Dahomean high officials “with that ceremony and respect which had been always customary; and to which indeed they had been entitled, in consequence of the courtesy and politeness they had always shewn towards the white men”.⁴ Though sometimes provocative towards his British superiors, Abson represented his country with diplomatic restraint.

According to Abson, however, Gourg’s expulsion was brutal: “It does not appear, that the natives had any reasons, sufficiently strong, to warrant this violent behavior.” He reported that Gourg was seized by a gang one afternoon between the English and French forts, beaten, bound, carried to the ocean-side beach, “obliged to remain all night on the sand, exposed to the musquitos and sand flies”, then “thrown into a canoe, in a manner never practiced even towards a black man”. The canoe was ordered into a very heavy sea that repeatedly drenched Gourg during a three-hour ordeal. He was then put on a small vessel that took him to the Gold Coast, where he was transferred to a French ship. Abson said Gourg died on that ship from the treatment he had received, but he may have been misinformed.⁵

Just a year after Agonglo took power, Abson was already complaining to Cape Coast Castle about his behaviour. Gold Coast canoemen employed by Cape Coast Castle had been blown ashore in a storm and imprisoned at Ouidah by the Dahomeans. Agonglo wanted the British to pay for their release. The king had not answered Abson’s response “respecting the poor unfortunate Canoemen. I am at a loss”, Abson wrote, “to know what we shall doe [*sic*] if things are here to be decided by the King for Messengers sent to [Abomey] never come back.” The Englishman had sent one to the capital two and a half months earlier, and the Portuguese and French governors had done likewise even earlier, and none had returned to Ouidah. The Portuguese governor had also sent his “Wench” to Abomey at the king’s request for eight or ten

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days, but she hadn't come back either. Just before this message was sent, Abson's messenger returned and said the king had refused to believe that Cape Coast Castle had offered only the equivalent of 480,000 cowries (30 gold ounces) for the canoemen. Abson said he considered the sum a generous present inasmuch as the canoemen had cost the king nothing, but thought Agonglo might be persuaded if "a trifle more" were added to the ransom the next time he met the sovereign.⁶ No record seems to exist of how the matter was resolved. A sad postscript informs us that the people of Komenda, the Gold Coast home town of the canoemen, sent cloths and other items to redeem their countrymen, but the goods could not be offloaded because of bad weather and went all the way to the Caribbean on a slave ship, with the captain promising to send them back to Cape Coast Castle.⁷

By 1791 Abson's behaviour was clearly antagonizing Cape Coast Castle and the Company Committee. The former had been complaining to the latter about him. A message from the governor and Council to London read:

The Censure which you pass upon us on account of the repeated neglect & inattention of Mr. Abson; compels us to declare that it is really our firm Opinion, the above-mention'd Gentleman's marked Indifference to the Orders which he from time to time receives both from You & Us, proceeds, from a conviction in his own Breast, that if he was to be suspended the Service, his long residence at that place, added to the Influence which he has with the King of Dahomey & men of power in that Country, wou'd render it, not only a very difficult but a very dangerous enterprise to those who might be sent down to Whydah on that Service, shou'd he wish to incline to be refractory.⁸

Abson returned to annual Day Books in 1791 and some subsequent years, or none at all for a few, until his death in 1803. He might have considered Archibald Dalzel's return to West Africa in 1792 as Cape Coast Castle governor a stroke of good luck. As his first direct boss in Africa in 1767–70, and someone who obviously valued Abson's contribution to his soon-to-be-published *History of Dahomy*, Dalzel seemed to be an empathetic superior. But this was not to prove true.

To believe Dalzel, his relations with his one-time assistant degenerated within a year into total disaster. In a letter to Abson of 1793 marked "Private", Dalzel wrote:

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I have done and am ready to do everything which friendship can require. It has been and shall be my earnest endeavor to disembarass your affairs and rescue you from censure and disgrace. It gives me pain to think I have been so unsuccessful. Neither expostulations nor threats seem to have made any impression of sufficient weight to remove the apathy and indifference which are so injurious to your character. I admonished you again and again concerning your remissness respecting your public duty. I defended your public and private character against repeated attacks. I gave you several invitations to come up [to Cape Coast Castle], which if you had accepted you might perhaps have eluded the public inquiry which I am no longer able to prevent. I think it may be in my power at last to impress you with a due sense of the perilous position in which you stand. Every one from Whydah whom I have conversed with declares that you never mean to quit the Country. I have requested you, if this were the fact, to be candid and not to suffer me, who wish so much to befriend you, to remain ignorant of your intentions. You have assured me you have been belied [lied about] and I wish to believe you, yet I have not observed on your part any convincing proof that you seriously intend to retire from or remain in the Country, it behoves you, especially as you do not sit well with the King [Agonglo], if I may judge from his Letter to me which I forwarded to you some time ago. This circumstance alone, one should think, ought to make you sick of Dahomy. But whether it be your desire to retire from or remain in the Country, it behoves you to lose no time in complying with the order of the Council; otherwise I cannot answer for the consequences. No excuse will be admitted except ill health or absolute constraint by the King of Dahomy. Therefore I shall expect you by the return of this Boat, or by some other early conveyance. If you should be of opinion that I have treated you with asperity in this and some other former Letters, I have to plead as my apology, that if I had regarded you less I should have been more sparing of my animadversions and advice. I have all along conducted myself towards you to what I conceive to be the duty of a real friend. As such I trust you will consider me, and if my admonitions have made a due impression, I expect you will awake from the fatal lethargy which seems to have benumbed you, and spare me the painful task of addressing you again in the stile [*sic*] of reprehension which I am always solicitous to avoid.

Dalzel's disappointment with Abson may be at least partly explained by his own personal history. He was a diehard slaver whose career in the trade would span 45 years. A Scot trained as a physician, he soon realized he was not fond of doctoring and would "never make a good

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M.D.”.⁹ In need of a decent income, partly to support his widowed mother and four younger siblings, he joined the Company and in 1763, at the age of 22, was assigned to the fort at Anomabu on the Gold Coast as, quite naturally, a surgeon. Four years later he moved to Ouidah as chief of William’s Fort, a remarkable promotion for a man of 26. According to a modern mini-biographer, Dalzel saw his new job as a way to get rich quickly through private slave-trading, which he had already undertaken at Anomabu.¹⁰ After three years, he resigned from the Company and left Ouidah on a slave ship to the West Indies with 104 Africans to sell. He accepted a promissory note from a planter who bought most of them. It was never fully paid, and Dalzel’s anticipation of substantial wealth had to be delayed. By 1773, however, he owned a slave ship and by 1775 two others. He also started a plantation in Florida. But the American Revolution brought him more bad luck. While travelling from Jamaica to England in 1778 on one of his vessels, he and it were captured by American privateers and his losses were so severe that he had to file for bankruptcy once he got home.¹¹ This humiliating experience may have caused him to change the family name from Dalziel to Dalzel.¹² His Florida plantation was seized by Spanish allies of the Americans.¹³ He thought he could recoup his losses by becoming a privateer himself, but two piratical voyages proved largely fruitless and he gave it up.¹⁴ He eventually returned to slaving, this time as a ship captain in the African trade from 1783 to 1791.¹⁵

Beginning around 1787, Dalzel became a spokesman for opponents of the burgeoning British movement to ban slaving. Under a pseudonym, he wrote letters to the Liverpool press assailing the newly founded Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.¹⁶ When, in early 1788, King George III told his Privy Council to set up a committee to investigate the slave trade, the slave merchants of Liverpool chose Dalzel among others to testify for its continuation. He appeared twice before the committee, defending the trade from the Gold Coast and Dahomey. Soon afterward, the House of Commons decided to discuss a bill to improve the conditions of slaves on the Middle Passage, and the Liverpool slavers again deputed Dalzel to testify against it before a committee of the whole House. Despite his medical credentials, he expressed the view that the super-crowded stowage of slaves in ship bowels did not endanger their lives.¹⁷ The abolitionist Thomas

Clarkson, who was present at the meeting, had inside information that on his most recent slaving voyage Dalzel had lost 15 of his 40 crewmen. Aware that when a high proportion of seamen died, a lot of slaves usually did too, he arranged for Dalzel to be asked about the voyage near the close of his testimony, and much later reminisced:

I desired ... that a question might be put to him, and in such a manner, that he might know that they, who put it, had got a clue to his secrets. He became immediately embarrassed; his voice faltered; he confessed with trembling that he had lost a third of his sailors in his last voyage. Pressed hard immediately by other questions, he then acknowledged that he had lost 120, or a third of his slaves [and] 12 others had perished by an accident, for they were drowned. But were no others lost ...? None, he said, upon the voyage, but between 20 and 30 before he left the Coast. Thus this champion of the merchants, this advocate for the health and happiness of the slaves in the middle passage, lost nearly 160 of the unhappy persons committed to his superior care, in a single voyage!¹⁸

When William Wilberforce introduced a motion in the Commons the next year to abolish the slave trade, he mocked Dalzel for warning that Liverpool would be “undone” by abolition.¹⁹ Wilberforce’s goal was not achieved for 18 years, but Dalzel was soon rewarded for his testimony by the Liverpool merchants, who recommended to the Company Committee that he be granted the Cape Coast Castle governorship. When that ended in 1802, he returned to private slaving. He owned one slave ship by 1804 and a second by the following year, and kept them to the very end of the British trade in 1807 and even a year beyond. But great wealth continued to elude him, and he is thought to have died bankrupt in 1811.²⁰

Dalzel’s *History of Dahomy* came to the attention of scholars with the boom in African studies in the mid-twentieth century. Loren K. Waldman, an American who was not an Africanist, dismissed the book as nothing more than an anti-abolitionist “polemic”.²¹ At the other extreme, the Nigerian historian Akinjogbin wrote that “No one who has ever ever read [it] can fail to be impressed by its elegance and power ... Certain passages ... compare favourably with the best literary traditions of the eighteenth century ... The only monument which [Dalzel] left behind and by which he is still remembered is his brilliant compilation.”²² The probable consensus was expressed by John Fage

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and Robin Law. In his introduction to the book, Fage conceded its “anti-abolition intent and flavor”, but “as a historian of Dahomey ... [Dalzel] seems to have done remarkably well ... [He] is no mean historian of eighteenth century Dahomey and its neighbours.”²³ Law acknowledged that the book was “tendentious” and “designed (and doubtless consequently distorted) to support the anti-abolitionist case”, but said “it affords a useful picture of the nature of the Dahomian state as it existed in the second half of the eighteenth century”.²⁴

Dalzel’s basic but unspoken complaint against Abson may have been that he no longer took slave-trading seriously. Akinjogbin apparently accepted Dalzel’s tongue-lashing of Abson at face value. To Dalzel’s charges of apathy, lethargy and indifference, he added ineptitude. By 1789, he wrote, “Abson’s management of the Whydah fort had become so inept as to undermine whatever little confidence was still placed in its usefulness.” But the only example he gave was that Abson had become “inconveniently slow in sending his accounts” to Cape Coast Castle. He went on to say that “As from 1790 Abson stopped all repair works on the fort which therefore started to fall down and to leak badly”. But a Royal Navy inspection of the fort in 1790 found it “in tolerable good Repair”, except for the lack of gun carriages, the guns themselves “very bad being old and Honey combed”, and termites destroying the gun bastions.²⁵ (Guns hadn’t been fired for decades except the ones used for salutes, and those were kept outside the fort walls. Moreover, the fort, as previously mentioned, was basically indefensible.) There was no suggestion that Abson had stopped all repairs. For that accusation Akinjogbin relied on documents dated to 1804 and 1809, and also cited a seemingly peremptory naval inspection report of 1793 that, besides noting the gun problem, claimed that “All the Exterior Walls [were] going to ruin for want of repair”.²⁶ The Day Book for all of 1794 refers to various fort improvements, including “Sundry Iron work ... mixing & carrying Swish [sun-dried earth used as a building material] & Sand ... making a new flag” and paying “the King of Dahomy’s People assisting to repair the Fort”.²⁷ The next surviving naval inspection report, from 1795, observed that the fort was “in very bad Repair owing to the Rain being this Year very Seveer [*sic*]”, a perennial threat to mud walls in the tropics that might also explain the 1793 comment.²⁸

Akinjogbin's most serious criticism of Abson, perhaps, was that he had become "increasingly subservient to the Dahomean authorities and less able to stand up for the rights of English traders" (who traded primarily for slaves). He made the charge without giving a source or an example.²⁹ It was refuted, in effect, two pages later by Akinjogbin himself. He wrote: "Agonglo . . . , like his predecessor [Kpengla], held Abson responsible for the paucity of the English ships that called at Whydah, and he tried unsuccessfully to bully him into writing to England for more ships."³⁰ It would seem, rather, that English traders preferred other ports, in Angola and Nigeria, where slaves were more abundant and cheaper. "For his failure," Akinjogbin added, "Abson was generally unpopular in Dahomey towards the end of his life."³¹ Again, he gave no source, and ignored the eyewitness testimony of the British ship's surgeon John M'Leod, who described the outpouring of grief in Ouidah at Abson's funeral in 1803 (see below). Akinjogbin also wrote that Abson's death was expected to end "all the obstacles to the flow of English ships to Whydah", but he admitted that "that did not occur". The two references he cited did not view Abson as an obstacle to trade.³²

Whatever his failings, Abson remained at his post for a decade after Dalzel's sharp, voluminous warning, and in fact outlasted the latter's Cape Coast Castle governorship by a year. Akinjogbin's unflattering view of Abson has, however, had its effect. For instance, Hugh Thomas, author of a popular book on the slave trade, in his sole mention of Abson, writes him off as "the incompetent English representative at Whydah", but cites only Akinjogbin's book as a source.³³ As if the hard-boiled slave merchants of the Company Committee would have put up with an incompetent fort chief for 33 years.

In 1809, six years after Abson's death, a rather slanderous letter from a Cape Coast Castle governor (who probably never knew him) to the Company Committee appeared to reflect Dalzel's lingering, baleful influence. It made the dubious accusation that Abson had stopped furnishing Day Books from 1790 on and that Dalzel had had to write them himself. Records of Day Books have survived from 1791, 1794, 1796, 1799, 1800, 1801 and 1802 without evidence of Dalzel's alleged role. The letter also accused Abson of failure to pay fort slaves from about 1790 onward, and of spending nothing on repairs or improvements to the fort during the same period. These two charges were credited to

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two William's Fort staff members who served briefly in 1793 and 1803. There is no evidence that Abson ever withheld salaries from fort slaves,³⁴ and there is good evidence, as we have seen, of fort repairs in 1794. The 1809 letter also bizarrely criticizes Abson for continuing to make the routine, anticipated gifts to the king and his high officials until his death. The writer seemed unaware that for decades European fort chiefs who didn't play by Dahomean rules had invited expulsion. Yet the message ends with approval of generous reimbursement of Abson for debts owed him by the Company, without explaining who the money would go to.³⁵

I can't help thinking, perhaps overoptimistically, that Abson's alleged decline may have instead signalled a moral redemption of sorts.

THE FINAL YEARS

1794 was a fateful year for Ouidah. It saw the violent end of 91 extraordinary years of peace among European nations trading there, imposed first by a king of Hueda and continued by Dahomey's sovereigns. The blow was struck by naval ships of Revolutionary France, whose domestic Reign of Terror had reached its climax earlier that year. Abson reported the event in detail to Dalzel.

On the night of 7 December 1794, a squadron of six French ships appeared in the Ouidah roadstead. It consisted of a 50-gun man-of-war, a 32-gun frigate, two brigs totalling 40 guns, a large 22-gun transport, and a hospital ship, also with 22 guns. The last-mentioned was a London vessel that had been captured off Madeira by the French, as three English prisoners put ashore by their captors would later inform Abson. During the night he heard gunfire, and when fog cleared next morning he saw English flags flying over the six ships. There were three Portuguese ships in the roadstead, one of which, from Lisbon, had been fired at and dismantled. The other two came from Bahia, Brazil (they were obviously slavers).

Neither Abson nor the French or Portuguese governors yet knew that the predators were French. In fact, the French fort chief and some compatriots came to William's Fort to, as Abson put it, "condole with me on the trouble I should have with the Portugeeze and Dahomans". A Portuguese delegation headed by the governor did arrive soon and

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“begged” Abson to contact the invaders. They were particularly alarmed because the two Bahia slave ships, both planning to leave that morning, had been ordered to fly flags and fire 21-gun salutes at 6 a.m. in honour of the Virgin Mary since it was the feast of her conception, “always a great Festival with the Portuguese”, and they hadn’t.

Abson sent his eldest son George to the beach with a letter for the commander of what was thought to be a British squadron. A lieutenant from the Portuguese fort went along with him. Meanwhile, the Yovogan showed up at William’s Fort with four Dahomean chiefs to ask Abson:

what Ships they were that was [*sic*] doing the mischief in the Road, I told him I did not know; he asked what Flags they hoisted I told him English but that in War time there was no depending on Flags, he began to get warm and I told him to keep his Breath till such time as I had answers to my Letters [he had sent an earlier one which canoemen had refused to transmit to the squadron] or till we heard further on the business.

Around 11 a.m. Abson:

had a Message from George from the Beach informing me no Canoes would go off, but that an Officer was landed from the Lisbon-man who informed him they were French Ships under English Colours committing the depredations on the Portuguese Shipping, presently afterwards the Portuguese Officer came here [to William’s Fort] and brought a Message from the Commander of the [French man-of-war] that he had ordered [the Lisbon ship] to be dismantled as being the largest and most convenient in which he proposed to put all the Slaves out of the [two Bahia vessels, which] he should burn [before] he left the Road. These menaces he put into execution for soon after we saw [one Bahia ship] turned a Drift and on fire, and then the [other] on Fire at Anchor, immediately after a signal was thrown out from the Commodore and the two Brigs were presently under way, and afterwards almost immediately the whole Squadron.

Their abrupt departure was reportedly caused by the sighting of three presumably hostile ships. The squadron took from the Bahia vessels several large casks of the strong alcoholic drink aguardente, provisions, gunpowder, tobacco, 6½ lb of gold, and all the clothes of the officers and crewmen except what they had on. From the Lisbon ship they took brandy and clothing. “Where they particularly affronted the Portuguese was in destroying the Ornaments of their Mass, their

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Images the Priests Gown etc. and taking their Silver Cup, drinking out of it Brandy, Wine and then beating it with an Hammer and then throwing it overboard.”

A few days later a chief came down from Abomey “to ask if ever it was known that like depredations were committed in this Road, [he] had orders to assemble all the old people of the three Forts, and Dahomay men” but first he went to the beach “to put his foot in the Place where the mischief had been done, when he returned we were all called to [the Yovogan’s house] to hear the King’s Message where the French and Portuguese Governors had a most dreadful dispute ... calling one another Thief Scoundrel”. The Yovogan and other chiefs who had come

on the part of the King did all they could to pacify them in vain, when we were desired to retire till they got cooler the next day we were called again ... the Portuguese Governor brought a ... Priest of one of the Ships to tell of the Indignities he underwent in the Road; when made a Prisoner the French threatned [*sic*] to hang him, and what the French did to the ornaments of his Chapel and his Person as mentioned above.

The message eventually delivered to the three fort governors told them

that in consequence of the Disaster the King [Agonglo] would take the Forts into his own hands and would ... insist on our giving him a list of all the People and effects belonging to the Fort, and private property, which I was to sign and send him up, we were all of us to write to our constituents and insist upon their finding the actors of the Catastrophie and that they were to be sent up to him when found.

The French governor Deniau (who, as we’ve seen, had given up the “de la Garenne” in his name after the French Revolution to save his job and possibly his head) complied with the king’s demands. Abson and the Portuguese governor refused. Agonglo punished the Englishman by forbidding him or anyone in William’s Fort to visit the Ouidah market or the other two forts, and Abson and George could not board any English ship. Abson told Dalzel he was “really puzzled [*sic*] to know when this business will stop”.¹ Abson’s comprehensive report on the French attack raises doubts about his alleged indolence and indifference.

He made no attempt to explain the unprecedented French action, but it may have been linked to a decree issued by the National

Convention in Paris in February 1794 to abolish slavery in the French colonies. Naval Jacobins apparently felt the decree gave them licence to assault and pillage any ships involved in the slave trade. Their reported anti-clerical excess fits this pattern. The reaction of the French fort at Ouidah suggests that the attackers acted on their own, in buccaneer fashion. They transferred several hundred slaves from the Bahia ships to the dismasted Lisbon one, but left before it could be repaired, so we don't know what they intended to do with the captives. The French historian Pierre Verger thought, rather, that it was the outbreak of war between France and England in 1793 that gave his "corsair" compatriots an excuse to "cruise along the coast of Africa searching for the ships of England and her allies".²

(The liberation of slaves in the French colonies, ignored by many planters, was repealed under Napoleon in 1802, which led to the Haitian rebellion two years later. Napoleon abolished slavery on his return from Elba in March 1815, but less than three months later he was defeated at Waterloo and slavery (not the trade itself)³ was soon restored. France finally abolished it for good in 1848, only 15 years before the United States.)

Two French ships identified by Abson as privateers from the Senegalese island of Gorée struck again in the Ouidah roadstead in 1797. Their targets were an English slave ship, named *Quaker* in obvious mockery of the abolition movement's champions, and two Portuguese slavers from Bahia. They captured all three vessels but left one of the Portuguese ships "for the conveniency of the Portuguese Officers and Crews". Abson found the behaviour of the captain of the larger French ship "much more genteel than what was practised" by the commander of the 1794 squadron.

Since this mischief has been done," he added, "Mehu on the part of the King ... has been here and we have not experienced any of the hardships that was [sic] imposed upon us on a former occasion, to the contrary, the King sent us word how sorry he was, and desired to befriend us in any thing in his power.

The king was Adandozan, who had succeeded his father Agonglo a few months earlier.⁴

Agonglo was fatally poisoned or shot by a woman at the palace, probably on behalf of a prince in a dynastic struggle. The murder occurred

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on 1 May 1797, a week after two Portuguese priests arrived in Abomey in hopes of converting Agonglo to Catholicism. One of them, Vicente Ferreira Pires, wrote a book about his visit to Dahomey that was not published for more than a century and a half.⁵ Pires thought Adandozan was behind the killing, but that is highly unlikely. Pires blamed it on what he said was Agonglo's agreement to convert at his first (and only) meeting with the two priests, which seems dubious.

For me, Pires's most interesting observation was about a woman in Agonglo's harem. He described her as a "mulata", the daughter of a governor of the French fort at Ouidah who, "out of generosity, [had] offered her to the king to be his wife". In fact, as far as we know from other sources, she was none other than Sophie, the wench of Joseph Ollivier de Montaguère, who, at the end of his nine-year tour in 1786, had given her to Kpengla for safekeeping. Agonglo had inherited her from Kpengla's harem, and Adandozan would in turn possess her. According to Pires, "the poor unhappy little thing even today yearns to see herself free from that life, far from that seraglio ... [where] she lives like a brute ..., wishing for someone to get her out of there".⁶

After his return to Paris, Citizen Deniau summed up Adandozan in a written report: "This young man is not yet twenty and will surely be more docile than his father, whose tyranny made him detestable to his neighbours and subjects."⁷ He could not have been more wrong. Adandozan would become the most controversial ruler in the oral history of the Dahomean kingdom, so despised that he is left out of banners depicting the heraldic insignia of its sovereigns.

Professional chroniclers of the kingdom acknowledge Adandozan's existence as a regent, but never as a king, describe him as a blood-thirsty criminal and catalogue his alleged atrocities. "While quite young," says a noteworthy oral traditionalist, "he did away with those who offended him." He is said to have once cut open a pregnant woman's belly to know the sex of her foetus. On another occasion, he supposedly ordered the killing of a man he considered too richly dressed. The man's head, wrapped in a loincloth, was brought to him, and he exclaimed: "That's good! He won't be haughty anymore!" Still another anecdote has him preparing a magnificent reception for a distinguished visitor. Many gifts were assembled on a mat in front of the throne, and Adandozan invited the personage to approach. The mat hid a deep hole,

and the guest plunged to his death with all his presents. The regent, overjoyed, cried out: "I am generous! No one leaves me without carrying off something."

Adandozan remained in power for 21 years, and as time went on, says the oral historian, he turned against his own family and top-ranking associates. On an alcoholic binge one day, he is said to have struck his eldest sister with a sword. He violated a sacred Dahomean tradition by refusing to pour water on royal tombs. Late in his career, he bound the wrists of his two top ministers and other great chiefs with cords as tightly as he could, and spat on them with an alcoholic drink. They doubled over with pain in silence, but, when freed, they met and swore to kill him. He was, however, spared by a younger brother named Gezo who ousted him, and lived on for decades in custody.⁸ (Gezo would reign for 40 years and arguably became Dahomey's greatest king.)

This satanic image of Adandozan was reinforced by Dahomean writers. One said his name "recalls to the Dahomean's mind the most outrageous cruelty and barbarism", and that "in a drunken state, [he] organized mass massacres".⁹ Another wrote: "In Abomey, [his] name is synonymous with shameful debauchery, sadism and decline ... He yielded nothing to Nero in cruelty ... [was a] tyrant [and a] despot ... [and the people] tired of the king's sadism and vices."¹⁰

These traditions were not published until the twentieth century, but already in 1843–4 French visitors were being told that the Dahomean people had deposed Adandozan "because of his drunkenness, madness and excessive cruelty"¹¹ or "because of his vices and his despotism".¹² Soon after, Frederick Forbes, a major nineteenth-century British source on Dahomey, heard that Adandozan was overthrown because Dahomeans were "disgusted with [his] cruelties" and "generally hated" him.¹³ In 1852 still another French visitor described Adandozan as "kind of a bloodthirsty madman who was continually drunk, and who in drunken moments used to put his most devoted subjects to death".¹⁴

Édouard Foà, a French historian who witnessed the final years of the independent kingdom toward the end of the nineteenth century, accepted the oral version of Adandozan's rule except that he ranked him as a king. He termed him "one of the cruelest and bloodiest" monarchs in Dahomean history. "He so maltreated his people," wrote Foà, "pushed his despotism and his tyranny to such a point, that the bounds

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were crossed. The slave raised his head, the victim turned against his executioner, and this people so humble, so obedient from its beginning, this people for whom humility was a second nature, revolted and toppled him from his throne, massacring those who tried to defend him." Foà regarded the king of his time as a tyrant too, "supported by his subjects without a murmur", and reasoned that Adandozan "must have pushed wickedness to a paroxysm to end up that way".¹⁵

Even Akinjogbin, who unaccountably decided that Adandozan "was an imaginative and progressive young monarch, far ahead of his times", conceded that he was executed or sold into slavery "many princes, chiefs and war leaders who had supported the losing side" in the dynastic struggle, and that "none of his measures [to solve Dahomey's economic problems] brought any significant relief".¹⁶ But in Akinjogbin's view, stories of Adandozan's wickedness were "totally misleading, ... disseminated [by Gezo's descendants] ... to legitimize their line to the throne and preserve the appearance of continuity ... His deposition in 1818 was ... not entirely ... a result of his bad character."¹⁷ A French historian, Édouard Dunglas, also dismissed at least some of the derogatory traditions about Adandozan as the inventions of courtiers currying favor with Gezo. "Defamation of the expelled prince", he wrote, "legitimized the usurpation", so his memory was "systematically blackened",¹⁸ This may well have been a factor, but would not seem to account for the ferocious reputation of Adandozan in Dahomean legend.

What mainly concerns us about Adandozan, however, is his reaction to Abson's death, something that is not even mentioned by all the critics.

As we have seen in Abson's response to the 1794 French attack on shipping off Ouidah, his first-born child George, who had spent an unspecified time being educated in England, was already helping out his father. Abson's daughter Sally would also assist him, to such a degree, in fact, that two twentieth-century French historians of Dahomey, Dunglas and Cornevin, somehow got the impression that she succeeded her father as director of William's Fort in 1793 and governed until 1803.¹⁹

Fortunately, we have the testimony of ship's surgeon John M'Leod, who spent the last four months of Abson's life at William's Fort and stayed on a few months more, which gave him ample time to get to know Sally. She was, he wrote:

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about twenty years of age, had a fine, animated, expressive countenance, and was remarkable for the elegance and symmetry of her form. She dressed most probably according to some fashion of her own, wearing merely a piece of cotton, or silk cloth wrapped loosely round, extending from the breast to a little below the knees, with a sort of shawl or scarf thrown across the shoulder, leaving one breast with the arms and legs exposed. She certainly borrowed no aid from foreign ornament; but nature had done enough, for in her simple and sylvan attire, she was truly beautiful. She knew England only from listening to the tales of her father, but she was proud of her English blood; seemed on that account, to consider herself of superior degree; and in her carriage exhibited a wild, yet graceful air of dignity.

When in the company of her elder brother, she had a manifest advantage in point of manner. His, was an unsuccessful attempt at what now o'days would be called *dandyism* or spurious gentility, airs he had acquired when *at home* [in England] for his education. Hers was frank and easy; for never having been conscious of a superior, she had had none to imitate, and was therefore free from every awkward affectation and constraint, except that instinctively felt, because implanted by nature in the sex.

The king of Dahomey had repeatedly demanded her as a wife; but neither herself, nor her father, would ever for a moment listen to the proposal.²⁰

M'Leod arrived in Ouidah at the beginning of March 1803 on an English slaver, the captain of which planned to set up a private "factory" there specializing in the purchase of female slaves. He apparently told the doctor that the area was considered "the Circassia of Africa" because of the beauty of its women, "not from the fairness, but from the glossy blackness of the ladies' skins, and the docility of their dispositions".²¹ He left M'Leod in charge of the project and sailed on to Lagos to buy male slaves. Abson agreed to house M'Leod at the fort, and asked him to dine at his table.²²

Sometime that spring, Abson's health declined, but in May he went to Abomey anyway to attend Annual Customs with the other two fort chiefs. According to John Edward James, a doctor (like M'Leod) who held second official rank at William's Fort, Abson's health worsened in the capital and:

he apply'd to the King for a pass to return [to Ouidah], his request was treated slightly, and ... not comply'd with for fifteen days, during

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which ... he was lodged in a damp Hut that leaked in every part of the Roof when it rained. The consequence was the total loss of the use of his limbs and almost every other faculty. He arrived [in Ouidah on 6 June] in such a debilitated state as to be past all Medical Aid whatever; every attention was paid to him during his illness ... He departed this life [on 27 June] after an illness of six weeks and [was interred] with every Military Honour.²³

M'Leod added the information that Abson had asked not to be buried at the usual place near the fort's gunpowder magazine, the little staff cemetery known colloquially as the hog-yard, but at a certain spot under a tamarind tree in the orange grove outside the fort, and that wish was fulfilled.²⁴

M'Leod tells us that:

since she had grown up, [Sally] had a house or cottage of her own near the orange grove, with a little establishment, and slaves to attend her; but on her father returning sick from Abomey she again took up her residence in the fort; became his nurse; attended him constantly with the most affectionate care; and when he died nothing could exceed the poignancy of her grief. She followed the procession to the place of interment, and when the ceremony was finished, flung herself on the grave, overwhelmed with the deepest sorrow.²⁵

Sally's sorrow was widely shared. M'Leod, who helped organize the funeral, recalled that "the spontaneous attendance of apparently the whole of the native population [of Ouidah], many of whom seemed much affected, was a high tribute to the memory of Mr. Abson, and the best proof of the respect in which he was held".²⁶

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According to M^rLeod, Sally's position was now precarious:

To her father she had been accustomed to look up with respect and affection, because she had seen him revered and esteemed by all who knew him. During his life, she had held rather a prominent place; but his death in a moment extinguished every hope of happiness, and left her a helpless stranger on her native soil.

Under such circumstances ... she clung to me as her friend and protector, and my sympathy was never so strongly, perhaps never so justly, excited. Mr. Abson had always treated me with a degree of friendship and paternal regard...; and during that seasoning, or fever, which Europeans must undergo in first landing in such a climate, I may fairly say I was preserved from death by the unremitting attention of his daughter, who watched me with the kindest solicitude.

I soothed her with the promise, that when the ship came for me, she also ... should be carried with us to some of the settlements to windward [mainly on the Gold Coast], where the English power was more respected; and where, under the protection of those who had served under and been attached to her father, she might, on the remains of his property, live in comfort and security.

She continued regularly to appear at the mess-table, as she had been wont to do during her father's illness, but generally sat there abstracted and regardless of the food; and for the next three or four days wandered between the fort and the orange-grove in the manner of one who had some dismal foreboding. At last she suddenly disappeared.

M'Leod questioned servants about her at breakfast time. They "made no reply, but hung down their heads and looked terrified and confused". He searched for Sally in vain, finding her cottage deserted. Finally, "an old and faithful domestic" of Abson took M'Leod to a secluded spot and whispered that "a number of the king's half-heads had arrived at midnight and carried her off to Abomey".¹

Adandozan was quick to react. As a report by J.E. James indicates, Sally was abducted just a few days after her father died, along with her two younger brothers. On 2 July a royal messenger arrived from Abomey bearing the king's condolence to James, but who also received information that Adandozan had exulted over Abson's death. Possibly on the same day, another royal messenger came down to Ouidah "with private and peremptory Orders [to the authorities] to seize all Mr. Abson's Children and bring them up to Abomy, ... which order was immediately executed ... excepting that the eldest Son George, who was ... at [Little?] Popo [with a British ship owner] ... but people were also sent there to seize him [which] would complete the ruin of his Family already too far advanced."² There is no evidence that George ever returned to Ouidah, and almost surely he was taken from Popo to Abomey. Neither he nor his brothers were ever heard from again.

On 9 July James received a royal order to hand over the clothes and other belongings of the three Abson children then in Abomey, including a pair of gold earrings and a ring with a ruby set in gold, both said to have been given to Sally by her father. Next day the king's chief half-head told James that "all public and private Accounts, Letters and Papers of every description" that had been in Abson's possession were to be delivered to a Ouidah official. James refused, saying he would seal the papers until he received instructions from the Cape Coast Castle governor and Council. Ouidah officials threatened to seize the documents by force, and James warned that "such an insult to the British Flag" might lead to abandonment of the fort. The officials desisted but made other demands on Abson's properties and indicated they would not let any of his effects leave the country. "I have to observe", James concluded, "that the insolence of these people at the present time is beyond conception."³

On 1 August another royal message told James to bring Abson's papers and the fort's "public Books" to Abomey, which he again

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declined to do. "I fear ... that if I went," he wrote Governor Jacob Mould, "numberless depredations would take place, not only on Mr. Abson's property, but perhaps on the Company's. I therefore am determined ... that nothing but superior force should cause me to leave the Fort."⁴ Mould shared James's indignation, and asked him to transmit an inventory of Abson's property as well as all his papers and accounts as soon as possible to Cape Coast Castle.⁵ He forwarded James's reports to the London Committee "by which", he wrote, "you will perceive ... in what a tyrannical and insolent manner the King of Dahomy acts".⁶

Citing the "very violent & arbitrary proceedings on the part of the King of Dahomey on [Abson's death], as well as many other Occasions", the Committee asked the slave merchants of Liverpool and Bristol whether the Ouidah fort should be maintained.⁷ Apparently they answered yes because the fort was not abandoned until 1812, five years after the banning of the British slave trade cost it its *raison d'être*.⁸

Akinjogbin tells a much different story of these events, contending that James and M'Leod misunderstood them. "Some time after 1783," he says, "Abson seems to have assumed Dahomean citizenship." But he gives no source for this improbable claim, nor does he explain how "citizenship" was obtained or what it might have involved. "Moreover," he continues, Abson:

like other directors of the forts, had the status of a chief under the Yovogan. After his death, therefore, Adandozan, in accordance with the Dahomean practices, seized Abson's property and four children from his marriage with a Dahomean, as he would have done with any Dahomean chief after his death. James, ... who did not fully understand the situation, reported Adandozan's "tyrannical" measures to his superiors at Cape Coast Castle ... The governor ... sent the report of Adandozan's action to the ... Committee in London which in turn informed all the English traders to West Africa ... The result of this unfavourable publicity was that Dahomey began to be very unpopular with the English. ... Macleod [*sic*] gives the impression that Sally's seizure was due to the king wanting to marry her contrary to her wishes. His explanation is probably wrong since that would not dispose of the seizure of Sally's elder brother George and her two younger brothers.⁹

But the fort directors were obviously not like other chiefs, the so-called caboceers of Dahomey. They were much more privileged.¹⁰ They

did not have to grovel on the ground when approaching the king, prostrating themselves and throwing dust over their heads, a practice required of even the highest Dahomean officials. They shared with the monarch alone such rights as travelling in hammocks,¹¹ wearing shoes or sandals, and raising cattle. Chairs were provided only to European fort governors and shipmasters at public ceremonies.¹² Caboceers were not allowed to march under a “white man’s umbrella”. Unlike the nobles, fort chiefs could dine with the sovereign.¹³ Though the king inherited deceased caboceers’ families and estates, there is no evidence that European governors, who, as we have seen, often died in office, were treated likewise. If they had been, Akinjogbin, a conscientious researcher,¹⁴ would have found written proof. Moreover, he improperly referred to Abson’s wench as a married wife, which might have made a difference. Rounding up Abson’s children stealthily at night (if M’Leod is accurate), and so hurriedly that they couldn’t pack their clothes (or Sally her jewels), suggests that it was not routine behaviour. Questioning the idea that Adandozan was erotically motivated seems wrongheaded, given the fact that Sally ended up in his harem. At the very least, the king would have wanted to watch Sally’s brothers carefully once they became aware of how she was being treated. Seizing them would also demonstrate the king’s authority over Europeans, and mask his sexual appetite for Sally. The possibility that he did away with the brothers is not unlikely.¹⁵

Conceivably, a once-widespread African belief may have been responsible for the Dahomean distinction between caboceers and European fort chiefs. Since the arrival of the first Portuguese in sailing ships, peoples along the West African coast had tended to credit whites with superior knowledge—a fair technological assessment. Capt. Phillips, on his 1694 visit to Ouidah, found that the Hueda “much admire white men, and say, That God loves them, because they have such plenty of all sorts of commodities; and are much puzzled to think how we find the way thro’ the sea into their country”.¹⁶ An anonymous French description of the Hueda kingdom thought to date to c.1715 said, “The Negroes have a lot of deference for all the whites in general and regard them as something well above them.”¹⁷ This respect doubtless dwindled under Dahomean rule, given the subservience of the European forts to royal authority, but may still have had an effect.

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M'Leod learned at second hand of Sally's fate:

It was now ascertained, that when forcibly carried away, and hurried after a long journey in the presence of the impatient king, she, to the great horror and astonishment of all the courtiers, not only refused to kneel, or pay him the least mark of respect, but with a total disregard of life, boldly accused him of oppression and injustice, and disdainfully denied his right of control over her. The despot, in the first transport of his rage, pushed her violently and dashed her on the ground; but, as if suddenly reflecting that he might have gone too far in the outrage already committed, or more probably awed and overcome by the noble intrepidity of her conduct, he was withheld from proceeding to extremities, and merely ordered her to be instantly removed from his sight.

He never permitted her to return to Whydah, but Mr. James ... had opportunities, in his visits to Abomey, of seeing her within the walls of the seraglio, though only at a distance, and he never was allowed to speak to her. He learnt, however, that from the moment of her seizure she had become a prey to grief, and after lingering some years in this state of despondency, sunk at last broken hearted to the grave.

Perhaps no event of my life ever made a deeper impression on my mind than the violation of poor Sally. Added to the remembrance of many generous acts of kindness ..., she so evinced the spirit of a heroine by the undaunted manner of asserting her independence in the tyrant's face, as to command my admiration and respect, and to heighten a feeling of sorrow for her fate, which a lapse of years has not effaced. The king appeared to claim her on the ground of her mother having been his subject, and on the death of her father he considered the only bar to his pretensions removed. But she was born in the fort, under the British flag, and had, therefore, an undoubted right to be free.¹⁸

Sally might well be considered a pioneer African feminist. Her reported behaviour on meeting the king in Abomey calls to mind a Dahomean legend. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, a king named Akaba died and his twin sister Ahangbé temporarily succeeded him as regent. Some West African peoples, such as the Igbo of what is now southeastern Nigeria, killed twin infants, regarding single births as the exclusive human norm. But twins were highly regarded among the Fon, and were treated equally well, even those of different sexes. However, Ahangbé's son was assassinated by opponents to force her to abdicate. As the story goes, the denouement came at a public session of the royale council. Ahangbé, decked out in all her finery, sat majesti-

cally on the throne, flanked by the highest officials. Suddenly she rose, descended from the dais, and was met by a woman servant with a vase of water. In a gesture of supreme contempt, Ahangbé stripped and proceeded to wash her most intimate parts while cursing indiscriminately the high and low of the country. She predicted a great misfortune for Dahomey (interpreted nearly two centuries later as the French conquest) and then resigned. (A younger brother succeeded her and, as Agaja, would become one of Dahomey's great kings.)¹⁹

The only experience in Dahomean history that might be remotely compared to Sally's was Sophie's, the concubine whom Ollivier de Montaguère gave to Kpengla at the end of the Frenchman's years as fort commander. As we have seen, Sophie was passed along from Kpengla's harem to Agonglo's and finally to Adandozan's. Ollivier de Montaguère had left her with two sons, but they were not taken to Abomey like Abson's children. Instead, their father had obtained land for them near the French fort, which was developed by the older son Nicolas as a commercial center for slave traders. Brazilian ex-slave immigrants called him D'Oliveira, and descendants of Ollivier de Montaguère and Sophie live in Ouidah under that name to this day.²⁰ There is no evidence that the three Dahomean kings who exploited Sophie ever considered her half-French sons as their inheritance.

Sally's fate was not soon forgotten by British officials in West Africa. According to Akinjogbin, the seizure of Abson's children (unnecessarily) poisoned relations between England and Dahomey.²¹ As late as 1864, Richard Burton, after serving as British consul in the region, wrote of Sally's "tragical end."²²

The kidnappings may well have influenced the British ethnologist A.B. Ellis, who in 1890 wrote that Adandozan had "gained such a reputation for cruelty and licentiousness that the Dahomis are even now ashamed to rank him with their former kings. His evil propensities were influenced by habitual drunkenness, and under his rule neither life nor property were safe."²³

The traditional Dahomean verdict on Adandozan, related in the early twentieth century by a court chronicler who was a brother of Béhanzin, the last independent king, is that he was deposed in 1818 because his "atrocities and injustices had wearied the Dahomeans", and therefore his "name was erased forever from the dynasty".²⁴ In the

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colorful appliqué banners that are still being produced and that chronologically assemble symbols of Dahomean sovereigns, he is omitted.

* * *

Our story of Abson ends as it began in the first chapter, with predators invading William's Fort in darkness and carrying off harmless inhabitants. Instead of leopards leaping the walls to grab livestock, the alleged human descendant of a leopard sent his half-heads to Ouidah to snatch children by night. *Sic semper tyrannus*.

ABSON'S CONTEMPORARIES

This last chapter shifts from Abson to seven other Europeans stationed on the West African coast during the eighteenth century: a Frenchman, another Englishman, two Irishmen, a German who served the Danes, another German who became completely Danish, and a Dutchman. Books or magazine articles have already been written by or about them, based on good archival research, as was not the case with Abson. I chose them because of the available material, but also because they bear comparison with Abson for one reason or another. The first is a very rare man who devoted decades to the slave trade but ended up a dedicated abolitionist. The final section concerns Senegalese women who wedded and worked with European slavers, mainly French and British, and who often wound up as wealthy and powerful in their own right.

Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge (aka Joseph Pruneau)

We have already seen that Pruneau de Pommegorge, who had three tours of duty at Ouidah's French fort between c.1748 and 1764, the last as director (and three years before Abson's arrival), was impressed by the skill of local merchants and the agricultural abundance of the country. His admiration of Dahomeans went even further and can hardly be equalled in eighteenth-century French literature and archival documents.

The Dahomeans, he wrote in his 1789 book:

are brave to the point of fearlessness, & though warlike are no less industrious. They make very beautiful ivory canes, three & a half feet long, from a single piece, & clubs fluted at one end, made of a single elephant's tusk. For this cane or club, they often employ 120 to 150 pounds of ivory, because they don't have the necessary tools to saw these teeth lengthwise. But these canes and clubs are as well made as our European workers could do them. They also make pretty straw baskets, in diverse colours. In addition, cotton loincloths, which they wear. They fabricate other garments made of fan-palm leaves, which they split with threads & attach to each other at the end; they make a material out of it ... [But most] prefer cotton materials, [such as those] we bring them from Rouen and India.¹

Ignoring the country's submission and tribute to Oyo that preceded his first tour at Ouidah by a few years (it would last into the nineteenth century), Pruneau de Pommegorge wrote that the Dahomean army had:

never been defeated or even bested. It is regarded by neighboring peoples as invincible, it makes all who have to defend themselves tremble; they even claim that if this army were vanquished, not a single member would convey the news, he would have his head cut off on the battlefield. If this law is barbarous & typical of the sovereign who made it, one must at least concede that it maintains the army's spirit of bravery, & sows terror among the neighbours whom they incessantly approach to plunder.²

Pruneau de Pommegorge denounced Dahomean tyranny and barbarism like other European authors, but went further than most in condemning the slave trade. He began his chapter on Dahomean trade as follows: "Their principal & almost only commerce is that of slaves, whom they sell to ship captains who trade ashore & sometimes in the forts, to procure all the merchandise they need, or that they don't need, because the country produces everything essentially necessary for life."³ He went on to describe the workings of the slave trade in detail:

Each ship, to have permission to trade at Ouidah, pays the king customs in merchandise to the value of eight to ten captives, according to the size of the ship. Then it begins its trade, & as soon as it has eight to ten captives, men, women or children, it sends them on board. When its trade is somewhat abundant it's a matter of three months, or sometimes less, to send off the ship, but when it is not [abundant], or there

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[is too much competition], they sometimes stay seven to eight months to complete their trade, which ordinarily causes frightful mortality in the cargo. In the [Atlantic] crossing, which takes four or five months to get to our American islands [in the Caribbean], this delay often totals more than a year, during which these unfortunates remain on board with their feet in irons, & the night in steerage, which is only three & a half or four feet high, horribly crowded together, moreover badly nourished, & always in fear of being eaten by the whites. The principal disease that almost always kills them is *Scurvy*, which is caused as much by the long time at sea as by the bad food, which consists only of heavy broad beans with a little palm oil which worsens this disease, all the more because its heavy & floury substance thickens the blood. Imagine the depopulation caused by Europeans in this part of the world by the infamous trade that they do there, & on which I would like to draw the curtain, and hide myself; but since I've undertaken to tell the truth about everything that happens on this coast, I don't think I can hide from the reader other acts of cruelty no less unheard of, and on which I have outlined some parts that revolt human nature, & of which the unfortunate trade carried out in these countries is the sole cause. I unfortunately did it myself. Great God! It's only your infinite goodness that can pardon me for it. I was at the time swept along by a bad example; I regarded it as permissible, without noticing that maxims of state are often contrary to the holy laws that you have engraved at birth in the depth of our hearts to never give our fellow creatures worse treatment than we would want ourselves to receive.⁴

To disclose to the reader more of the heinous crimes Europeans commit on the coast of Africa, I'll report several horrifying ones, & everyone who has served at [the French fort in Ouidah] will attest that they conform to the most exact truth ...⁵

When ... captives arrive [at Ouidah], the [African] merchants summon the whites to sell the captives, but since they know very well that the ship captains don't at all like to take on women who have children still breast-fed because of the disadvantage of the cries & the dirtiness of these children, they destroy them.⁶

They have so little room on the ship that it's impossible for the other women not to be soiled by the excrement of these little creatures. That produces endless quarrels between the women slaves, & it's for this reason the captains don't at all want children who haven't reached the age of three or four years. That's why the merchants don't hesitate at all to perform acts of cruelty unknown to the most savage nations of America, which all the captains ignore ...⁷

The chiefs of all these [African] nations, to procure the 45,000 captives [required yearly], kill an infinite number, always cutting the throats of the most aged, & the other unfortunates surrender only after hard fighting. Thus, it's again the Europeans that must be blamed for this destruction of men, women, children & old people. Add to that the prodigious number of negroes who die on the ships because of the long time it takes to cross from Africa to America, their bad food, & the grief that ends up killing them.⁸

A last cause of the destruction of half of these unfortunate captives is that after spending seven to eight months at sea, sometimes ten months with irons on their feet, on arriving in our islands they are sold, & immediately sent to forced labor.⁹

It's no exaggeration to say that no captive arrives in America who has not cost the life of many other human beings. And it's men, Frenchmen who call themselves Christians, whose self-interest makes them commit such crimes! The most guilty would be the sovereigns who, if knowing these horrible details, did not forbid their subjects the right to be scoundrels. Sad inconsistency of our laws: they condemn to death an unfortunate woman, whose soul is honest, since she is sensitive to shame, & who, forced to commit a crime, is the first to be tortured by the horror of committing it; & these same laws would authorize a commerce that can't be carried out without multiplying to infinity still greater crimes because the motive is vile. As a matter of fact, by what right do we arrogate the snatching of our fellow creatures from their homeland? to cause massacres & perpetual wars? to separate mothers from their children, husbands from their wives? to be caused by our greed to buy these unfortunates, that persons too old to be sold have their throats cut & are massacred in pillages under the eyes of their children? that newborn children are thrown to the wolves [jackals or hyenas] at night so that the mother not be refused by captains of slave ships? This happens at Ouidah.¹⁰

If one recapitulated the destruction caused by this abominable trade, & one could bring the truth to the foot of the throne, who could doubt for an instant that our sovereign in the goodness of his heart would immediately order the destruction of this odious trade ... [The person] who could approach the throne ... to present these sad truths to the sovereign would perform the most beautiful action of his life [and] cover himself with immortal glory.¹¹

Though Pruneau de Pommegorge's book appeared in 1789, the first year of the French Revolution, his references to the French king (Louis

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XVI, guillotined in 1793) and the fact that the book was published in Amsterdam not Paris, suggest that it was written at least a few years earlier. The author, who had returned to France from West Africa in 1765, lived into his nineties and died in 1812, must have rejoiced in 1794 when France banned slavery in its colonies, and mourned in 1802 when Napoleon partially restored it. He certainly deserves credit for moving from slaver to abolitionist late in life and telling much of the truth about the trade to whoever would read his book.¹²

James Phipps

Pruneau de Pommegorge was not the only European to diverge from stereotypes of low-born racists or ne'er-do-wells assigned to the African coast in slave-trade times, stereotypes that included officers as well as their underlings.¹³ An Englishman named James Phipps, similar to Lionel Abson in some respects, headed Cape Coast Castle for three years in the early eighteenth century. His father was a successful cloth dealer with ties to the Royal African Company who owned properties in Wiltshire, a county in southwestern England still home to Phipps descendants. James joined the Royal Company while still in his teens and served on the Gold Coast for 19 years. We know a lot about him because nearly 200 letters between him and his father, other relatives and friends are preserved in the Kew archives and were researched by David Henige, founder and long-time editor of *History in Africa*.¹⁴ While Abson lasted in West Africa nearly twice as long, Henige could rightly call Phipps's survival "unusual ... since most careers on the coast were fairly quickly cut short by death, leave, retirement or dismissal".¹⁵ As already indicated, disease was by far the main cause of human death.

James's first job on the Gold Coast, beginning in late 1703, was "writer" at Cape Coast Castle, a reminder that many low-level British employees of the Royal African Company (and probably the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa as well) were illiterate.¹⁶ In less than a year he was transferred to James Fort at Accra as "second factor", a quick step upward. He stayed there until 1709, when he was promoted to "Chief Agent and Warehouse-Keeper" at Cape Coast Castle. His boss there was Sir Dalby Thomas, a prominent Royal Company official known for his rectitude and simple lifestyle. Relying on Phipps and

other sources, Henige describes Thomas as “resolutely, almost perversely, honest and unselfish” in his dealings with the Company.¹⁷ Henige notes that during Phipps’s five years at Accra as well as his subsequent first two years at Cape Coast Castle he was under Thomas’s “tutelage”, that in fact Thomas treated the young man as “a kind of ward” owing to his friendship with James’s father. Phipps, however, came to consider Company officials as “ungrateful, perfidious, and base” and thought Thomas’s trust in the Company “naïve”, which may help explain “rancorous disagreements” between the two that preceded Thomas’s death in 1711.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Phipps seems to have been influenced by Thomas’s morality. If he had any misgivings about slavery, though, he kept them to himself, apparently even in his letters to family members. According to Henige, Phipps “accepted the slave trade unhesitatingly as a matter of business rather than a moral issue”.¹⁹ This was not the impression Abson gave in his later years, but of course Phipps lived more than half a century before the English abolition movement got under way.

A cousin named Seth Grosvenor, who had preceded Phipps to the Gold Coast, succeeded Thomas as senior official at Cape Coast Castle though he, too, had finally antagonized Thomas. Judging from Grosvenor’s behaviour when he returned to England in 1714, he must have been another positive influence on Phipps.

Like Abson, Phipps formed a liaison with a local woman whom he never named. John Atkins, the Royal Navy surgeon who visited Ouidah in 1721, stopped at Cape Coast the following year and reported that Phipps’s partner was “a *Mulatto* Woman, begot by a *Dutch* Soldier” at Elmina, the well-known castle and town captured by the Netherlands from Portugal in 1637.²⁰ Their relationship seems to have dated to Phipps’s first posting at Cape Coast Castle. Atkins observed that Phipps “dote[d] on this woman”, and Henige agrees that he was “obviously devoted to her and to their children”.

The couple had at least five children, four of them girls. Atkins describes the latter as “of fair, flaxen Hair and Complexion”. James sent at least three of the girls to England for education, a rare choice gender-wise for Europeans with children by African mistresses. The two eldest, Bridget and Susan, were taken there by Grosvenor, who oversaw their education and kept James informed of their progress. They

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attended a boarding school in the London area and had satisfactory records. Henige tells us that later, however, they were housed with the widow of a Company's ship captain and then dropped out of sight. The third girl, Grace, was taken to England in 1722 by Atkins himself, but we know no more about her. We know nothing about the fourth girl, Henrietta. Phipps hoped to send his son Thomas to England for schooling but died before he could carry out his plan.²¹

Between 1714 and 1719, Grosvenor was succeeded as senior Cape Coast Castle official by a procession of three men, and then, in July 1719, Phipps was appointed to the highest position, that of captain-general. Henige explains that this was "a title encompassing both civil and military authority and very seldom bestowed by the Company".²² It gave Phipps command of all English posts on the Gold Coast, but lasted less than three years.

Atkins knew Phipps and his family near the very end of James's career, and helps bring him to life for us. He reported that the captain-general occasionally persuaded his partner to attend "our Chappel-Service, and she complie[d] without Devotion, being a strict Adherer to the *Negrish* Customs".²³ The surgeon "attended the illness" of one of their children and of "the General" himself, and wrote that:

on both Occasions, I found, [Phipps] was so weak or so wise, as to give the preference of Fetishing to any Physical Directions of mine, wearing them on his Wrists and Neck. He was a Gentleman of good Sense, yet could not help yielding to the silly Customs created by our Fears, and shews the Sway it bears in the Choice or Alteration of our Religion.²⁴

In this regard, Phipps went further than Abson in accepting African traditions. He also appeared to consider his companion his real wife and to be more willing to anglicize her than Abson was, though the latter's wench seems to have died before this was possible. In Atkins's words:

He cannot persuade this Woman to leave the Country, tho' he has stole or forced her Consent for all the Children, in regard to their Education; she still conforming to the Dress of her Country, being always barefoot and *fetished* with Chains and Gobbets [chunks] of Gold, at her Ancles, her Wrists, and her Hair; to alter which in *England*, she thinks would sit awkward [*sic*], and together with her ignorance how to comport her self with new and strange Conversation, would in all likelihood alienate her Husband's Affections.²⁵

Atkins thought that Phipps's wife's "*Negro friends and Relations add[ed] Interest and Power to him*", and that he was not only "a kind Husband and Father" but also "a good Servant to the Company; assiduous and diligent". He cited the captain-general's steadfastness in resisting Dutch competition. At the same time, Atkins found that to preserve dignity at Cape Coast Castle, Phipps had "made his Carriage haughty towards all under him. He resides for ever within his Battlements ... He is seen not oftner than is necessary."²⁶ Other evidence suggests that Phipps maintained his subordinates' "respect and goodwill".²⁷

To Phipps's and others' surprise, after fewer than three years in charge, he was dismissed summarily by the Company in the autumn of 1722 on what Henige determined were "charges of little substance".²⁸ The document replacing Phipps with his colleague Henry Dobson gave no reasons for the action beyond "diverse causes and considerations". Dobson himself asked the Company to justify its decision and was told of complaints by a former captain of the Cape Coast Castle garrison who had quarrelled with Phipps and fled to London. The Company apparently reinstated the man, then learned from Dobson that he was utterly incompetent. The Company then told Dobson that complaints against Phipps were "very numerous" and "well grounded", but gave no details. According to Henige, the really important reason was that Britain's Gold Coast trade was not keeping up with Company expenses, a point that Phipps himself had been making for years. He had become "a convenient scapegoat for a series of circumstances quite beyond his control".²⁹

Less than three months later, on 15 January 1723, Phipps died at Cape Coast while waiting for a ship to take him back to England. He was about 37 years old. He left an estate estimated at no more than 100 English marks, equivalent to about £67, a pittance after 19 years' service.³⁰ He had hoped to become wealthy on the Gold Coast. His failure indicates his adherence to stringent Company rules.

Richard Brew

Probably no officer of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa has ever earned as meticulous a published appraisal as Richard Brew, an Irishman who spent 30 years on the Gold Coast, at least 10 of them

with the Company and at least 15 as a private merchant. (He thus fell six years short of Abson, and, unlike Abson, interrupted his African life once with a 20-month trip to Britain.) Brew's perceptive and straightforward biographer two centuries later was Margaret Priestley, author of the 1969 book *West African trade and coast society: a family study*. In leaving no stone unturned in researching a leading West African family, she was an Africanist ahead of her time.

Priestley judged Brew as "volatile and quarrelsome", "tortuous in the extreme", "quick temper[ed]", with a high "degree of bravado" and "a touch of the feudal lord in his behavior", "an extreme individualist, a tough but not uncultured adventurer".³¹ Cape Coast Castle governors, in their reports to the London Committee about his dealings with them after he had become a trader, found him "arrogant ... abusive in language, domineering ... and imbued with ... impressing upon the population his superiority in power, wealth, and importance" to the Company's agents.³² One of the governors complained of his "high-handed and disrespectful attitude" toward authority.³³ Priestley leaves no doubt that he was a shrewd operator, motivated by greed and egomania.

All this was balanced by some virtues, notably Brew's integration with Africans.³⁴ Apparently he totally lacked racial prejudice, though he never seemed to question slavery, the prime source of his wealth. Like Abson, he mastered the local language, in his case Fante,³⁵ spoken by a major ethnic group of the same name along the Gold Coast, and he mingled with native speakers. Also like Abson, he became attached to his biracial children, sending two sons to England for schooling, and willing his property to two daughters as well as his concubine. He had a library of eighteenth-century English literature,³⁶ as well as Shakespeare, and Priestley comments that his "literary taste was thus a cultured and discriminating one". She also remarks that his letters "show that he was influenced by the excellent prose writing of the age", and that he could "portray with ... clarity developments in trade and politics, the tension of personal relationships and minutiae of daily existence. Brew's style was direct and forceful, with the polished turn of phrase and the well-placed allusion typical of the century."³⁷ When he criticized Company officials, she reports, he "expressed [himself] forcibly and in great detail in letters and documents".³⁸

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Richard Brew may, in fact, have made a greater positive mark on his adopted country, through his descendants, than any other European stationed in precolonial West Africa. His son Harry (sometimes called Henry), one of the two educated in England, became the founder of six generations of Brews who distinguished themselves in Gold Coast trade, law and public affairs during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and who are remembered in Ghanaian history.³⁹

Brew's life probably began in c. 1725 in County Clare, Ireland, as the eldest son of "a brewer, vintner and gentleman" also named Richard.⁴⁰ The father suffered serious financial problems before Richard junior turned 20, and the young man is believed to have taken off to the West African coast in 1745 to make a better living.⁴¹

Nothing is known about his early years there until January 1750, the year the Company of Merchants succeeded the Royal African Company, when he was serving as a clerk in Cape Coast Castle with a modest yearly salary of £63. He must already have impressed his superiors because only two months later, around the age of 25, he was appointed chief factor at the English fort in Tantumkwari, a coastal community on the eastern edge of the Fante homeland.⁴² He spent the rest of his career in Fante-speaking country, including Cape Coast, except for a short assignment at Dixcove to the west.

Brew returned to Tantumkwari in 1751, and on the side began developing private trade connections with Fante merchants. As noted in Chapter 2, unlike the Royal Company, the Company of Merchants permitted trading by fort personnel, but only if they did not compete with private British merchants and ships. The Cape Coast Castle governor at the time colluded with Brew, and the London Committee, after receiving complaints from Liverpool and Bristol slave dealers and ship captains, ordered the governor in late 1753 to suspend the Irishman. In early 1754 Brew resolved the issue himself by leaving Company service to set up a slaving business near Tantumkwari.⁴³ As Priestley observed, the controversy between Brew and the Committee became "a recurrent theme throughout his life on the coast, whether from the defending or attacking end".⁴⁴

Two years later, the Committee reinstated Brew and in fact named him commander of a new fort at Anomabu, a job that had fallen vacant. Anomabu, close by, to the east of Cape Coast, was one of the main

slave-trading centres on the Gold Coast.⁴⁵ Brew's growing influence with Fante leaders had much to do with his recall because French rivals of the British were becoming more active in the area. Cape Coast Castle governor Charles Bell said the Anomabu post called for "a thorough Acquaintance with the Temper and manners of the natives and no small interest in the ruling men", and his Council unanimously decided that "no white man possessed the needed qualities to a greater degree" than Brew.⁴⁶

The Irishman soon cultivated the chief Fante caboceer of Anomabu, called John Currantee by the English (but Eno Baisie Kurentsi by the Fante).⁴⁷ Priestley regards him as "an extremely skilled exponent of the art of bargaining".⁴⁸ Brew actually lived in Currantee's house for some months before he could occupy the new fort.⁴⁹ He went so far as to make a Currantee daughter his "country wife", and did not conceal her name, Effua Ansah, as other partners of wenches often did.⁵⁰

Tobias Smollett relates an episode demonstrating Currantee's shrewdness and Brew's daring. French warships had reached the Gold Coast in 1757 with the aim of attacking Cape Coast Castle, and were expected to win. The Anomabu caboceer planned to send a present by canoe to the French commander. Brew destroyed the canoe with fort guns before it could take off. Currantee then prepared a message to be sent overland to the French, congratulating them on their expected victory. But when he learned that the British had won, he sent the same message to Governor Bell and assured him that armed men had been ready to march from Anomabu to his assistance whenever summoned.⁵¹ (Ludewig Ferdinand Rømer, a Dane whose mini-biography is included in this chapter, also talks about Currantee, whom he calls Corrantrin or Corrantryn, and mentions his son Bassi, who spent a lot of time in France, which may explain Currantee's initial pro-French behaviour.)⁵²

Bell, an admirer of Brew, was succeeded by a man who wasn't, and the Irishman decided to leave for Britain in early 1760 after nearly 15 years in West Africa. During his stay in London, Brew grew close to a powerful Committee member named Samuel Smith who would give him strong support when he rejoined the Company, and formed a substantial London-based private trading business with him called the Smith and Brew Company. Priestley judges Smith even more unscrupulous than Brew.⁵³

Brew's late-1761 return to the Gold Coast, where Charles Bell had been restored as Cape Coast Castle governor, marked the beginning of the most successful part of his life. Priestley rates the 1760s as "his most profitable period".⁵⁴ He resumed charge of the Anomabu fort, and was ranked third in the Council. One of his first actions was to deliver a blue velvet umbrella with a gold fringe to Currantee, a gift from the Committee which he had procured in London.⁵⁵

Brew seemed to be planning for his public service to end with this second tour at Anomabu because he soon started building his own house, which would be called Castle Brew, only 50 yards from the fort. He also operated a private company based in Anomabu from the early 1760s to 1776, the year of his death.⁵⁶ By 1763 Brew was using the fort slaves to construct his house, a fact that does not seem to have been reported to the Committee for nearly two years.⁵⁷ According to Priestley, "the explanation for this silence, as for so much else that worked to Brew's advantage in his relationship with the [British] forts, lay in the fact of his partnership with Smith".⁵⁸

The Committee finally suspended Brew at the end of 1763 after he ignored a warning to rein in his commercial activities, including personal shipment of slaves to the West Indies and North America, which plainly violated Company rules. Even then, Smith was able to obtain special treatment for his partner. Castle Brew was not yet ready for occupancy, so the Committee authorized the Cape Coast Castle governor and Council to give the Irishman first six months, then a year's, personal accommodation and storage space in the fort. Even after the house was ready, Brew was allowed to monopolize public storage space for slaves to which other traders had an equal right. Smith persuaded the Committee to rebuke the Cape Coast Castle governor for criticizing Brew over warehouse facilities. And he sent Brew copies of official dispatches which he was no longer qualified to see.⁵⁹

When Brew moved into his castle, it became the centre of his company. Priestley thinks it deliberately rivalled the next-door fort to impress the Fante. It was at least as big as the fort and enclosed by high walls, and the Cape Coast Castle governor thought it could shelter 200 to 300 men. It had a "most noble Hall", its own warehouses, and 20 cannon.⁶⁰ The house was furnished like a rich European gentleman's mansion.

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The day Brew died in 1776, Richard Miles, the future Cape Coast Castle governor and Abson's correspondent who then headed the Anomabu fort and who had been chosen by the Irishman as executor of his estate, inventoried the castle's contents. The hall and bedroom had mahogany furniture. The hall, for social and business activities, contained two settees, 23 Windsor chairs, four tables, two bureaus, bookcases, a sideboard and a glass chandelier. Besides a bedstead, the bedroom had a settee, two armchairs, a table, a bureau and a bookcase used for valuables such as gold. Elsewhere in the castle were four bedsteads for visitors, four mirrors, 66 pictures of various sizes, a miniature art gallery and an organ, and of course there were candles everywhere for lighting. Household equipment included much silverware, Wedgwood china, glassware and linen. Miles found over five dozen plates, two dozen cups and saucers, decanters for wine, punch and water, wineglasses and some 26 tablecloths.⁶¹

Brew was clearly a dresser. His wardrobe contained fifteen waistcoats, nine coats laced or plain, sixteen shirts, nine velvet collars, ties, patterned black silk breeches, old gold lace and several pairs of stockings, some of silk. Cards and a backgammon table showed that he not only read in his leisure time. His library, already cited, contained nearly a hundred works though some were multi-volume books. Priestley describes the collection as "the normal reading matter of any well-educated contemporary".⁶²

Brew's private business from the castle peaked between 1765 and 1771. Late in that first year, a Dutch observer called it "the most flourishing trade ever known" at Anomabu, and credited Brew with shipping "perhaps ... more slaves than any one man" in the region. Britons and Americans also testified to his bonanza.⁶³

Other than slaves, by far his main trade good, Brew trafficked in gold, ivory, beeswax and a cloth made in what is now southwestern Nigeria, and he also provisioned slave ships. Besides his primary contacts with Smith and Liverpool traders, he was in regular touch with North America, particularly Newport, Rhode Island. He was active in the triangular trade that took New England rum to West Africa, slaves to the Caribbean, and molasses from there to the rum distillers. Priestley mentions Brew's ties with the Vernon family of Newport, prominent in both the slave trade and the American Revolution.

Letters from Castle Brew about West African coastal events were published in American newspapers, including the *Newport Mercury*, which still exists. Brew, who would die just a month after America's declaration of independence, was involved earlier in 1776 in getting a schooner from the West Indies to Rhode Island for repairs, and then having it stocked with rum for its return to Anomabu.⁶⁴

In Anomabu itself in Brew's final months, he got into rare trouble with the Fante elite. For a commission, specialists known as gold-takers had once upon a time examined the metal sold to Europeans to make sure they weren't being cheated by African merchants. Eventually they branched into the slave trade, playing a similar role. Brew tried to eliminate his gold-taker as middleman in the purchase of slaves to lower the cost, which aroused the opposition of the whole profession, which Priestley defined jokingly as "about half the population of Anomabu". They demonstrated against Brew, threatened to enslave anyone who sold him provisions, and then stormed Castle Brew with gunfire until dispersed by his own muskets. The dispute was resolved in favour of the Fante in a palaver held in the British fort.^{65/66}

Brew's glory days, when as many as 14 ships at a time anchored in the Anomabu roadstead, gradually started to end from about 1768, thanks largely to his London guardian. Samuel Smith's main role in support of Brew was as an exporting merchant and ship owner who sent cargoes on credit to his partner at Anomabu and their other trading posts. Brew could also draw bills of exchange from Smith's London firm for coastal transactions with visiting vessels. Priestley's research "suggest[ed], at the very least, mismanagement on Smith's part, and perhaps a good deal more—some deliberate obscuring of the records as a result of his own speculations and financial juggling". His behaviour led, in Priestley's words, to a "morass of indebtedness". Smith was admittedly already "under a cloud" financially in 1768, when he dropped out of the Company Committee, and his career climaxed in bankruptcy in 1774.⁶⁷

Miles would later discover, as executor of Brew's estate, that Smith was not the only financial mismanager. He found Brew's books in "terrible confusion ... so badly kept ... that it was impossible to determine any man's account from them ... Since Brew's connection with ... Smith first began, hardly a single account appeared to have been properly settled or closed."⁶⁸

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Luckily, in his last decade, Brew would befriend a very different breed of man from Smith. He was the Reverend Philip Quaque, the first African to be ordained in the Anglican Church. Quaque was a Fante educated in England who served as Cape Coast Castle chaplain for half a century, beginning in 1766. The following year he spent a week at Castle Brew, where he held a service and preached a sermon in its elegant hall, and baptized Brew's two daughters, who would become heiresses. Brew's relations with Quaque were not always amicable: the priest himself said the Irishman once told the Anomabu fort chief that he wouldn't visit Cape Coast Castle "to be Subservient to and to sit under the Nose of a Black Boy to hear him pointing or laying out [the worshippers'] faults before them".⁶⁹ This rift eventually healed and, in fact, the Brews and Quaques merged. Richard's son Harry married a Quaque family member named Abba Kaybah, and they were the progenitors of generations of Gold Coast Brews.

Richard would seem to have been about 51 when he died. The cause is not known, but his 30 years in West Africa were a feat surpassed in the eighteenth century only by Pieter Woortman (reported on later in this chapter) and Lionel Abson. Brew would not have appreciated the aftermath. Samuel Smith had largely financed the construction of Castle Brew, and a cousin, Horatio Smith, had settled in Anomabu as an assistant to Brew in 1769. When Samuel went bankrupt, assignees took over his estate, and after Brew's death Horatio bought Castle Brew from them and renamed it Smith House. It was already in a bad condition, and in 1778 a big portion of it collapsed. Horatio occupied the house briefly as a private trader, then joined the Company of Merchants.⁷⁰ We don't know exactly what Richard's spouse and daughters inherited.

But Brew would have been pleased with Harry's progress. Since neither Harry nor his brother Richard junior was mentioned in their father's will, Priestley thought they may have been children of an unnamed wench who was Brew's first African partner in his earliest years on the coast. The brothers both returned from their English schooling in 1768. Richard junior had what Priestley called a "decidedly chequered career", including a period when he was disowned by his father, and he may have suffered an early death.⁷¹ Harry was married to the Quaque relative by 1770 but then does not reappear in the

records until 1792, when he was appointed assistant linguist at Cape Coast Castle. Priestley suggests he had engaged in trade at Anomabu in the interval. He must have retained fluency in English because the Cape Coast Castle Council quickly rated him “the best Interpreter” in the country.⁷² The chief linguist died in 1793 and Harry took on more important responsibilities. The Cape Coast Castle governor and Council supported a pay rise to £80 a year “on the grounds of his attentiveness to duty”, but the London Committee refused, pleading a shortage of funds.⁷³

A smallpox epidemic ended Harry’s life in 1796, probably in his mid-forties, but he had allowed his family to be inoculated by the Cape Coast Castle surgeon, and they all survived to preserve the Brew line for posterity.⁷⁴

*Nicholas Owen*⁷⁵

Like Richard Brew, Nicholas Owen was of Irish origin, but that was all they had in common besides spending years promoting the slave trade on the West African coast in the eighteenth century, and dying there.⁷⁶ A twenty-first-century psychiatrist might diagnose Owen, who admittedly was “much inclin’d to be malloncoly”, as a manic-depressive, but he had plenty to be depressed about. His father squandered a large fortune and let his children fend for themselves. Well-off relatives gave them no help. Judging from Nicholas’s and his younger brother’s flawed written English, the children would seem to have been self-taught. Nicholas’s first career for eight or nine years as a transatlantic seafarer instilled an aversion to that calling. His inability to get rich as a trader on the Sierra Leone coast, try as hard as he could, and return home in triumph weighed heavily upon him, not to speak of the fevers that often laid him low.⁷⁷

Owen kept a diary illustrated by his own drawings, some of which are reproduced in this book. He hoped the journal would be published, saving him from an obscurity he dreaded and justifying his life, but that did not occur until 171 years after his death. Eveline Martin, a British Africanist, saw to its publication, with a very helpful 19-page introduction, and also edited the journal. She left Owen’s highly erratic spelling largely untouched, generously blaming “its attractive originality” on

Irish “peculiarities of speech”, but drew the line at his “prodigal use” of capital letters and his “somewhat rare punctuation”.⁷⁸ (She did not mention that English spelling was still fluid in the eighteenth century, and that Samuel Johnson’s classic dictionary appeared just four years before Owen’s death.)

Owen differed markedly from Abson and the other slave traders in his religiousness. As Martin puts it, he displayed “a constant expression of belief in a Divine Disposer of all things”.⁷⁹ Without mentioning his presumed Roman Catholicism,⁸⁰ Owen thanked God for keeping him safe in all his undertakings, “carefully [conveying him] through all the uncertainties of this life”, laying out the future “to the best advantage for His creatures”, and specifically for “miraculously” preserving Owen (and his youngest brother Blayne, who had joined him as a sailor) “from the danger attending a seafaring life”.⁸¹ Despite his early “sufferings and hardships”, and what he considered his hermit-like isolation in Africa, Owen concluded toward the end that he “must be contented with [his] lot without complaining”.⁸²

Martin sees Owen’s loneliness as “one of the most vivid impressions” given by his diary.⁸³ For weeks at a time or even months he lived in a small hut-like house on a bank of Sierra Leone’s Sherbro River accompanied by only his own slaves or the African trader he was dealing with. But he found positive aspects. It was safer than risking danger out in the country. “It’s a dail [deal] of comfort to me,” he claimed:

that I can sit down in my own cabbin ... and injoy the fruts of a quiet retirement, which is a serenety of mind that a man can seldom attain to when he mixes with the busey part of mankind. I look upon the rest of the world as a scene of trouble and vanity. Europe, that ought to be the seet of all happyness that this life can afford, is now invoul’d in bloodey wars [the Seven Years War] and all other calamiteys attending it—here I sit down and reflect upon both without any danger from either, excep the want of goods ... These reflections I confess sometimes eases my mind from a desire of returning to my native country.⁸⁴

Elsewhere he explains away his lack of financial success with the observation that “riches is not aquired by deligency or management, but as lottery, some draws a prize and others a blank”.⁸⁵

Owen’s thoughtful musings are remarkable for a man who had little if any formal education. But his atrocious spelling and grammar some-

how coexist with beautiful penmanship,⁸⁶ which his artistic talent would seem to explain.

Owen's loneliness might imply that he lacked female companionship, but there is one brief reference in his journal to a partner he called "my woman".⁸⁷ Like many other Europeans, he does not give her name, nor does he mention any children.

We don't know when Owen was born, but his first transatlantic voyage in 1746 suggests that when he died in 1759 he was only in his early or middle thirties. His brother Blayne first joined him on a voyage in 1750, and their final voyage in about 1754 ended with the capture of their ship and the brothers themselves by West Africans. Though Nicholas must have experienced the slave trade during some of its worse moments on the Middle Passage, he wrote nothing about the maltreatment of victims. Martin found only one reference in the diary to moral opposition, still inchoate. "Some people", Owen wrote, "may think a scruple of conscience [conscience] in the above trade, but it's very seldom minded by our European merchants [merchants]."⁸⁸ Martin failed to find "the slightest hint that Owen himself felt any repugnance to the trade as he speaks of his work in it as an attempt 'to enlarge my fortune by honest means [means]'".⁸⁹

After losing all their goods and their freedom, the Owen brothers somehow had the good luck to be liberated by a doctor-turned-trader named Robert Hall, and decided to settle on the Sierra Leone coast as traders. Hall hired them for that purpose. His help reminded me of Samuel Smith's support of Richard Brew.⁹⁰ There was, however, a major difference. Hall was not wealthy like Smith. The brothers joined him on York Island, up the Sherbro River, and settled in the ruins of an abandoned English fort.⁹¹ They took off on their own after about two years of experience as Hall's agents, moved near the river mouth and built a house in 1757. After a few months they found it more convenient for trading purposes to live about a mile apart.⁹² They couldn't have chosen a worse time to seek riches, because the Seven Years War began in 1756 and almost closed down trade between West Africa and Europe and the Americas.

Like other Europeans, the Owens found the West Africans very hard bargainers. "You'll find men of ready wit," Nicholas wrote, "in all thing relating to common business." They usually arrived in "a great troop of

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canows",⁹³ bringing mainly slaves, gold, ivory, gum and camwood, but also food like poultry, plantains, rice and apparently palm oil, and they expected gifts like liquor and tobacco. If they were dissatisfied, a tedious "pilavour" (palaver) would follow.⁹⁴ Dealing with European slave ships was not easy either. Nicholas recounts a trip he took with four slaves he had bought from African merchants to sell to a ship, but the captain offered such low prices for three of them that Owen returned home with them.⁹⁵

Nicholas found solace in gardening, which he called "the chief imployment of my more retired hours, when I think myself happy".⁹⁶ He kept several small gardens, hedged in "to keep out the crabs, snakes, or other vermin". He added to his stocks of food with "all kinds vige-tables", including watermelons, pumpkins and a variety of pea.⁹⁷ Unlike Abson, he yearned for English provisions.

He also had a hobby he called "shell work", learned from a ship captain. "It's of a round form," he explained, "with a looking glass in the midle; I have wrought it into divers figures with various kinds of [sea] shell and moss taken from the bark of old trees and shrubs, which I have laid on with turpintine and bees wax boiled well together into a hard substance."⁹⁸

But his biographer was sure that writing his journal and making illustrations for it "filled up Owen's unoccupied moments with most satisfaction".⁹⁹ The published diary contains 87 printed pages, 16 detailed plates, four sketches and two maps. Besides examples of Owen's artistic skill in this book, a page from his diary shows his keen penmanship.

For Africanists, the most important parts of the journal are those containing Owen's observations about local people, likely to have been members of the Sherbro (or Bullom) ethnic group, said to number about two hundred thousand today. He also took note of the much more widespread Mandingo (or Mandinka) people, who number close to half a million in Sierra Leone. Owen had some harsh things to say about Africans and did not mix with them as readily as Abson or Brew, but he seemed to show more of an interest in their customs and might have drawn closer to them had he survived more than five years on the coast. Martin reckoned he spent many hours collecting information on their ways of life.¹⁰⁰

Owen called the coastal inhabitants

hardly above beasts, ignorant of all arts and sciences, without the comforts of religion or the benefits that an ingenious [ingenious] mind or person could shew them, without industry of cultivating or managing thier land to its perfection, destitute [destitute] of all wholsom laws and past perswasion to enter into the civil society with the rest of mankind,¹⁰¹

an unfair summation given in unpolished prose.

The Irishman himself went on to modify practically every criticism he made. He said their houses, built of wood and mud and thatched with grass or tree leaves,

seem comfortable as they are always neat and clean, spread round with mats to keep out vermin or could [cold] in the nights. Upon these mats the natives lie upon a bed or cabbins of sticks and curtains of mats hanging down to the ground ... Thier furniture ... consists of stools and earthen pots of ... country make with ... bags of grass or cloath to hold the good man's tabaco or cola [kola nuts], ivory spoons and cargo knives.¹⁰²

Owen added that their "chief deversions" were playing a wooden stringed instrument that he likened to "a bad fiddle" (clearly a banjo), and "they have likewise drums and other games or exercises of diversion".¹⁰³

Owen admitted that the natives believed in "a god who has made the world and all things" but complained that "they never worship him in any set place, or honour him more then by sacraficeing once or 2 a year". And he grumbled that they gave more honour to their "idols or devils" than they did to a divine being. He cited big African-made leather bags containing amulets (gris-gris) which they always carried around in the belief it would save their lives if endangered (as if Europeans did not also have comparable talismans).¹⁰⁴

Owen showed particular interest in the Mandingos' religion. He was well aware of their Muslim heritage, their ability to converse and write in Arabic, their knowledge of the Qur'an, and their ban on alcohol, but what seemed to intrigue him most was what he called their witchcraft. He watched a Mandingo priest wield a complex "instrument" that solved thefts by identifying the criminal, in this case an old woman who admitted her guilt. It made Owen "imagine that they have some demon

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or evil spirit to guide them in these trials". Though he felt it unreasonable for a Christian to believe in such things, he later accepted the idea that the devil intended "to draw these ignorant wretches to him self".¹⁰⁵ Witnessing two more such events confirmed his view.¹⁰⁶ He also described Sherbro trials settled by poisonous ordeals such as the one survived by Richard Lander at Badagry, Nigeria, more than a thousand nautical miles away.¹⁰⁷

The Irishman mocked the natives' legal system but at least acknowledged the importance of palavers for settling disputes, meetings of kings with councils of elders to resolve important problems, and the role of headmen of towns who sat and administered justice.¹⁰⁸ While he gave the impression of a savage society, he admitted that death penalties for whites or murders of whites were rare and could be avoided by the offer of goods in restitution, and that he himself had never even been hurt in the towns where he traded, that petty theft of knives, beads, tobacco "and such things that are handy to carry away" was common but that no one had ever broken into his house to steal his goods.¹⁰⁹

Though Owen said the natives were "miserably poor in general and live low as to vituals [victuals]",¹¹⁰ he gave the impression that they ate and drank fairly well. He mentioned rice "and other grain", by which he may have meant millet, sorghum or maize; plantains, bananas, kola nuts, pineapples, oranges, limes, papayas, palm oil, palm wine, poultry, oysters, and wild animals including deer, monkeys, elephants, crocodiles and several kinds of fish and birds. The watermelons, pumpkins and peas Owen grew were probably cultivated by the natives too. Besides the New World crops mentioned earlier, West Africans had, in fact, already enriched their diets by adopting crops from the Western Hemisphere, the Mediterranean region and Asia as well as domesticating every edible local plant. Crops not mentioned by Owen but probably available included yams, cassava, coconuts and shea butter.

Unlike Abson and Brew, who were fond of their biracial children, Owen asserted that "mallatoes" were "in a general way worse than the blacks", extorted more from them than white traders did, and were cruel enough to poison their own mothers to acquire their slaves and possessions.¹¹¹ But here, too, he qualified his censure with praise for a

mixed-race man named Henry Tucker who had acquired great wealth “by his skill and some other abillities [abilities] in the way of trade”.¹¹² Even before he identified Tucker, Nicholas revealed that he and his brother had moved from York Island “under the protection of a malato who bears great sway in the country”.¹¹³ Tucker had six or seven wives, and many offspring and slaves, who had built a town around him. According to Owen, Tucker was richer than kings, almost all the local people owed him money, and he was both esteemed and feared “by all who has the misfortune to be in his power”. Tucker had been in England and Iberia, was fluent in English and lived “after the manner of the English, ... [in a] house well furnish’d with English goods”. He was fat and “dresse[d] gayley”.¹¹⁴ Tucker helped Blayne Owen complete his own house at very little expense, which led Nicholas, who clearly admired and even envied the man, to finally call him “our good frind”.¹¹⁵

Owen was offended by what he considered patriarchy in everyday African life. He said women underwent “the hardest of the labour”, such as “makeing plantations and beating out the rice”, while men smoked their pipes, or danced in their homes, or drank palm wine in the shade. Women were kept “very much under” and were never allowed to eat with their husband. “All the time he’s eating shee stand[s] by with water to serve him and so upon all occations she waits like a servant upon her husband at home and abroad.”¹¹⁶ “If a man ... takes a fancy to any of his neibours’ daughters” and her father consents, the man gives the father and his friends as large a bride price as he can assemble, and “the girl is deliver’d to him as his wife or rather, in my opinion, his slave”.¹¹⁷

On 2 November 1758, Owen felt he was recovering from a serious bout of illness, and was ready to resume work again. But his morale remained low. “In this manner,” he wrote in a plaintive farewell, “we spend the prime of youth among negroes, scrapeing the world for money, the uneversal god of man kind, untill death overtakes us.”¹¹⁸ On 12 February 1759, he wrote “fnish’d” in his diary,¹¹⁹ and on 26 March he died,¹²⁰ perhaps not beyond his middle-thirties.

Paul Erdmann Isert

The German doctor and botanist who lived at William’s Fort in Ouidah for five months in 1785 but ignored Abson in his 1788 published book

is worth a longer appraisal for his unique anti-slavery efforts on the Gold Coast. Isert's connection with West Africa was brief but productive. The editor of a modern French edition of his book calls Isert "without doubt one of the most engaging European travellers who visited Guinea in the eighteenth century".¹²¹ A Prussian from Brandenburg, he arrived at Accra's Christiansborg Castle,¹²² Denmark's African headquarters, in November 1783 as chief surgeon at the age of 28, and died in January 1789 at 33 on an inland plantation he was setting up. But even that short period was interrupted by an eight-month visit to the West Indies in 1787, followed by a long stay in Copenhagen. He did not return to the Gold Coast until November 1788.

Isert was actually fed up with his job within three years. In the preface to his book, he acknowledged that his "chief motive for ... going to Guinea—and thereafter to West India [the Caribbean]—was solely an interest in natural science".¹²³ But Isert's views about slavery and his interest in Africans generally came to the fore in his letters. His modern translator and editor, the late Selena Axelrod Winsnes, explains:

From the outset Isert had an unreservedly positive attitude toward Africa and the Blacks, and an equally negative attitude toward the Europeans on the Guinea Coast. An admirer of [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau's philosophy he was eager to point out the corrupting influence of European civilisation on the Blacks. It was Isert's contention that the desire for European goods had led to robbery, the pawning of debtors and to murder, a crime that he claimed was unknown to the Blacks before the advent of the Europeans and their luxury items. The one area in which the Blacks fell short of his unstinting praise was in their unquestioning obedience to fetish priests, all swindlers in Isert's eyes.

He saw the Europeans as a thoroughly bad lot—lascivious, gluttonous inebriates. Life at the forts in the company of his adopted [Danish] countrymen held no pleasure for him. In Isert's view they jeopardized, even ruined, their health by consorting excessively with "Venus, Ceres and Bacchus". He found them men of little merit and commented that one had to have recourse to one's own resources in order to tolerate staying there ... He made no allowances for the background of many of the staff, for a difficult and boring life at the fort, and for the constant fear of illness and death, but he did recognize the factor of homesickness and grudgingly admitted that this could be ameliorated by taking a "(quasi) wife" ...

Isert's disdain, indeed contempt, for the others at the Danish establishments could not have been a secret to them. Since he wrote openly about it, it is safe to assume that he made no effort to hide his distaste. It is equally safe to conclude that this was a major cause of others "mocking" him, "ridiculing" him, not "understanding" him.¹²⁴

In October 1786 Isert boarded a slave ship bound for Copenhagen via the West Indies. The voyage changed his life. As recounted in a letter, Isert's ship, limited to 200 occupants "when used in the King's service", was crammed with more than 450 heavily chained, miserable slaves who had to be "kept in check" by 36 Europeans. Some slaves thought they would be eaten in the New World, and generally they foresaw nothing good, given the use by Europeans of "such violent means to secure them".¹²⁵ On just their second day at sea, the male slaves rebelled despite being "chained together, hand and foot, in pairs" and, additionally, kept seated in rows when on deck with "a strong chain ... drawn between their feet".¹²⁶

Isert was the lone European on deck because most of the crew were eating below. The slaves suddenly fell quiet, then let out "a shriek of the most horrifying tone that one can imagine" and stood up. Some hit Isert on the head with their hand chains, and he fell to the deck. He was pulled by the foot to the bow of the ship, and one slave slashed him with a razor across his forehead and temple, then through his ear down to his neck. A crewman who had reached the deck shot the razor wielder, and other slaves who were holding Isert released him. He managed to crawl to safety, leaving a blood trail from a severed artery in his right temple.¹²⁷

When European authority was restored, male slaves who had not been party to the uprising returned to their quarter. Those responsible leapt into the sea; some were rescued by small boats but 34 drowned. Only one European besides Isert was injured. In trying to stem the flow of blood, Isert fainted. When he recovered after a few hours, he found himself surrounded by seated black women "crying tears of sympathy" (an indication they were not chained like the men). By the time the ship reached the West Indies two months later, Isert had recovered from his wounds, which included a fractured skull. He learned he was attacked because the slaves mistakenly thought he was their owner. When they discovered the truth, they reportedly treated Isert very

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well, even applauding him on his morning visits (presumably for medical assistance). Seven more slaves would die on the voyage, which Isert considered "a very small number ... for such a great multitude of people, and in such conditions". He noted that high mortality, sometimes reaching 50 percent, was common on slave ships due to excessive time at sea and especially maltreatment of the human cargo, but that the Danish vessel he sailed on did its best for the prisoners.¹²⁸

The ship landed at St Croix, an island Denmark bought from the French in 1733 (and sold to the United States in 1917). The slaves were all sold within a few days.¹²⁹ Isert found their treatment by their new masters atrocious:

Since the price of these slaves increases nearly every year, the planter squeezes as much as possible out of them, just short of working them to death. The usual treatment of these miserable souls ... is beyond the bounds of humanity ... For petty, often imagined misdemeanors, they were displayed publicly at a stake and their flesh was slashed with a whip! The backs of most of them carry the bloody testimony of their whippings all their lives ... The wound is anointed with Spanish pepper and salt! ... The inventiveness in plaguing the Black is boundless. But no one is more barbaric to his slaves than that delightful brute, the free mulatto ... [The white] monsters of cruelty often do not give the blacks even the food that their employer has allotted them ... Work ... begins before sunrise and does not end until late at night. [Black overseers] supplied with horrible whips [beat the workers] much of the time ... This ghastly toil and the beatings, together with a wretched diet, either soon kill them or totally deform these so well-built Blacks ... A Black slave has absolutely no rights. A White person who has no connection at all with him can beat him half to death without any reason, and the slave dares not make the slightest move of resistance. If he does anything ... he has incontestably forfeited his life.¹³⁰

Winsnes suggests that Isert's anguish over the cruel treatment of the slaves was due partly to the fact that he himself "had had a hand in providing slaves for the plantations", though he did not admit it openly.¹³¹ His cure for all the horrors was to grow the crops raised in the Americas for export to Europe (primarily sugar in St Croix) on African plantations instead. In this way, he wrote:

the shameful exportation of Blacks from their happy fatherland could gradually be stopped. Willingly would the Blacks concede to us the best

and largest areas of land which have lain fallow for thousands of years, if we came to them with an olive branch in our hand instead of murderous steel; and, for a small payment, they would help us. And since they are already used to slave-trading there and cannot work the fields otherwise than with slaves, so should we accustom ourselves to buying them for a certain number of years, and to giving freedom to them as well as to the children born in slavery after they have reached a certain established age.¹³²

Isert decided to set an example by creating such a plantation on the Gold Coast, but first returned to Copenhagen in the late summer of 1787 to organize his project. The Danish finance minister, Ernst von Schimmelmann, favoured it and agreed to give Isert some money and the right to buy supplies on credit at Christiansborg Castle. Moreover, he was commissioned as an infantry captain to give him more clout among both Europeans and Africans.¹³³

During nearly a year in the Danish capital, Isert married the 22-year-old daughter of a prominent local family. She would accompany him back to the Gold Coast with a number of European volunteers, who brought wives and children. They arrived at Accra in November 1788 and soon settled in a hilly inland district called Akuapem, some 22 miles (35 kilometres) from the coast. Isert had become the first European to visit the area in 1786. He found the natives “very dexterous, quick on their feet, and in general ... keen mind[ed]”, and was friendly with their paramount chief.¹³⁴

The settlers were amazingly industrious. Before the end of the year they had planted their first crops, built a house as their headquarters, and begun making a road to the coast. On 21 December they held a ceremony of dedication, at which the Akuapem chief raised the Danish flag and swore fidelity to the Danish king. The settlement was named Frederiksnopel (Frederik’s City) in honour of the crown prince of Denmark–Norway.¹³⁵ But it was short-lived.

Isert wrote a letter on 16 January 1789 to Schimmelmann reporting his progress and requesting more aid, but five days later he died, ostensibly of a fever. His wife gave birth to a daughter the next month, then died, and the baby succumbed in March. The White Man’s Grave took females as well.

Isert’s unfulfilled plan for a plantation, written in German and translated into Danish, is still preserved. Its black slaves would never be

treated inhumanely, would enjoy judicial and property rights, and receive support from their master when they retired. An official would be appointed to protect their rights. But Isert unexpectedly went further: in Winsnes's words, he "assumed the roles of moralist and missionary". Class distinctions among both Europeans and Africans were to be maintained. Nakedness, even half-nakedness, would be banned. Polygamy would be illegal except for Africans who already had more than one wife. Miscegenation would bring immediate expulsion. As Winsnes put it, "Rousseau[s] ... 'noble savage' was to be tamed."¹³⁶

Frederiksnopel outlasted its founder by very few years. Illness and death had so ravaged the settlement that Isert could not be replaced by a fellow colonist, so a Christiansborg official, Jens Nielsen Flindt, was sent to take charge. Unfortunately, a well-disposed Christiansborg governor was soon succeeded by a man with a different viewpoint named Andreas R. Bjørn. Flindt reported to Schimmelmann that Bjørn had little interest in Frederiksnopel and even put obstacles in its way, such as transferring the colony's most valuable worker, a blacksmith, to the coast for a local project.¹³⁷ Another historian believes Bjørn "may have been justified [because he] thought that [two] new plantations which had ... been started by ... [Danish] individuals near the coast would prove more successful, since they did not require the long transportation by land necessary from Isert's plantation".¹³⁸ Nevertheless, Flindt resigned, and a well-qualified man chosen by Schimmelmann to replace him drowned in 1792 on the way to the Gold Coast when his ship sank.¹³⁹ Thereafter, Frederiksnopel gradually faded away.¹⁴⁰

Ludewig Ferdinand Rømer

Like Isert, Rømer was born in Germany and moved to Denmark. We don't know exactly when he made the move, but he became thoroughly Danish and, unlike Isert, wrote his books in his new language. As in the case of Isert, we have Selena Winsnes to thank for thorough research. Her work, *A reliable account of the coast of Guinea* (Oxford, 2000), is an English translation of Rømer's 348-page book published in Copenhagen in 1760, and also draws on a 64-page booklet he published four years earlier. The 1760 title is misleading because Rømer focuses on the Gold Coast, a relatively small though vital section of the Guinea

coast (and one that drew my attention in this chapter because of its English–Dutch–Danish conjunction).

Winsnes considers Rømer “well-educated”, citing his mastery of English, French and Dutch as well as German and Danish, his knowledge of Latin, his acquisition of “Coast Portuguese”, also known as “Negro-Portuguese,” the lingua franca of trade with West Africans, and some knowledge of Gã, the language of the Accra area, and an Akan tongue, possibly Fante.¹⁴¹ In spite of the language of his linguistic aptitude, Winsnes tells us he “was no intellectual, probably not particularly well read, his writing was rough and rambling ... not of high literary quality [and he] exaggerated freely”.¹⁴²

According to Winsnes, Rømer’s faults should be set against the value of his books. They were, for example, “largely original ... [with almost] no indication of borrowing”. Because of his decade on the coast:

his personal involvement with life both inside and outside the forts; his capacity for communication with acquaintances both European and African, and above all his genuine interest and curiosity, [the books] contain much information not available elsewhere. This is particularly true for the information on the Gã, about whom only a limited amount has appeared in the subsequent two and a half centuries. Rømer gives us glimpses into the lives and attitudes of this people, into their customs and their interrelationships, ... into the interdependency necessary between the Europeans and the Africans as both sides enjoyed an opportunistic coexistence; and, finally into the activities—including occasional skulduggery—of the Europeans at the establishments and on the ships ... The impression given is of a man who could establish rapport easily, and who was therefore as equally at ease in the world of trade as in the sphere of everyday life.¹⁴³

Rømer arrived at Christiansborg Castle in 1739 at the age of 25. Because of his talent for trade, he rose in a few years from assistant clerk to the high rank of merchant.¹⁴⁴ His ascent was halted in 1744 by a new Danish governor named Jørgen Billsen, who precipitated a conflict resembling the British one that had led to the replacement of the Royal African Company by the Company of Merchants. Since 1697 the Danish slave trade had been monopolized by the West India and Guinea Company but it was increasingly challenged by supporters of private enterprise. Rømer tried to instruct Billsen in trading practices on the coast but, in Winsnes’s words, they “were soon on a

collision course". Rømer strongly disagreed with his superior for punishing a sergeant who had traded privately. Billsen was in fact so offensive that the Christiansborg garrison staged a mutiny against him which he presumably settled with the promise of a pay rise that he failed to fully keep.^{145/146}

Billsen also succeeded in suspending Rømer, accusing him of involvement in the mutiny and incompetence in his mercantile duties. Winsnes calls the latter charge absurd since Billsen had already sent reports to Copenhagen praising Rømer's skill as a trader. This, indeed, calls to mind Dalzel's smears of Abson. Fearing further retribution, Rømer fled Christiansborg.¹⁴⁷

Rømer then spent an extraordinary period of many months as guest of three non-Danish forts on the Gold Coast, two Dutch (Crèvecoeur, in Accra, and Elmina to the west), and Britain's Cape Coast Castle, near Elmina. Unlike the sun-baked mud forts of Ouidah, those of the Gold Coast were of stone and brick, made to last. Crèvecoeur was destroyed in a war, but Elmina, built in 1482 by the Portuguese and captured by the Dutch in 1637, is now a Ghanaian historical museum and the oldest building of European origin in sub-Saharan Africa. Cape Coast Castle originated as a Swedish lodge in 1653, was occupied by the Dutch in 1663, and captured by the British the following year. Both are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Christiansborg Castle itself originated in the early 1660s, is now called Osu Castle, and used to be the seat of the Ghanaian government.

Rømer had particular esteem for the English—admiring them "to excess", in Winsnes's opinion¹⁴⁸—and he spent about half a year with them at Cape Coast Castle. He reported that they allowed him to read their Company files, and repeated a previous invitation that he join their staff. The Dutch, whom Rømer did not generally admire, were also hospitable, with Elmina reportedly giving him access to the files of the Dutch West India Company. Rømer's main hope was to return to Copenhagen to clear his name, and eventually a Dutch ship bound for Europe took him on board. The ship ran aground off Norway, with Rømer barely surviving. He lost all his belongings, including five years of savings, and rescued only a few parrots (as either pets or trade goods).¹⁴⁹ An Icelandic ship then took him to Denmark free of charge. In Copenhagen, testimonials he had received from the Gold Coast

English aided his defence, and he was not only absolved but promoted to chief merchant and sent back to Christiansborg in 1746. By that time, Billsen and his two successors had died in quick succession.¹⁵⁰

Like the Europeans who gave glowing accounts of Dahomey's inland beauty, Rømer idealized the richness of the land north of Accra. Where the mountains began, "the fertility ... is incredible as regards all varieties of plants, and [cereals]", he wrote. "He who plants ..., harvests [about tenfold] and more. How the Almighty has blessed this land." Elsewhere he calls it "the most wonderful land in the world, ... surpassing the West Indies in fertility and products." But he charged the inhabitants with laziness and lack of agricultural know-how, criticisms that modern historians would challenge.¹⁵¹

In 1749 Rømer was offered the governorship but declined, pleading ill health. He went home via the Caribbean, where he sold some slaves. This time he did not return to Copenhagen empty-handed. He left the West India and Guinea Company and opened a successful sugar refinery in the Danish capital. In 1751 he married a 19-year-old Danish girl who bore him 14 children before her death at the age of 38. Rømer died in 1776 at 62, outliving all but five of his children.¹⁵²

Winsnes notes that Rømer was "untypically frank about the most intimate ... African-European relations" such as miscegenation, and finds his attitude "refreshing in his honest treatment of the practice and its implications ... Other Europeans writing about Africa ... either looked the other way, or mentioned it with distaste. He pointed out not only how widespread it was but enumerated the advantages and disadvantages for both partners." Winsnes quotes him as saying, "each one of our [Danish] nation has his mistress"—and points out that he did not add "apart from myself". He makes no mention of a wench or children by her, but his subsequent prolific generation of Danish offspring suggests he was not celibate in his ten years on the Gold Coast.¹⁵³

The Danish authorities not only permitted European employees to have black mistresses, but encouraged the practice. As Rømer explained, "the Whites become naturalized, and it is apparent then that they are not so jealous, ill humoured, and desperate to leave the land as they were before".¹⁵⁴ A "Mulatto Treasury" even deducted fixed sums from an employee's salary to be paid monthly to his concubine and children. This unusual system functioned till the end of the official Danish presence in West Africa in 1850.¹⁵⁵

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Römer notes that when the man's partner bore him biracial children, he cared as much for her and them as a man with a married wife in Europe. Some did not want to leave their family on the Gold Coast, even if they knew they could live better lives in Europe. A prominent eighteenth-century Lutheran bishop, Christen Worm (not the cleric who wrote the preface to Römer's 1760 book), granted Christiansborg Danes permission to wed an African woman, but not more than one, convert her to Christianity, and take her with him when he returned to Europe if she wished.¹⁵⁶

Apparently referring to the practices of the Gã, Römer claimed that a woman already engaged to marry a black man, even a nobleman, had to yield to a European who fell in love with her. Winsnes explains that African families viewed alliances with Europeans as "forms of business strategies". She thinks, however, that such transferences were extremely rare.¹⁵⁷

Römer asserted that the local people "firmly believe[d] ... it [was] a great blessing to have a white child in their families, and a family, no matter how poor ... [would] support the little Mulatto ... Both good and evil [came] of these [biracial] marriages." A black woman could obtain food from her parents or friends and would not let a "wanton European" starve to death. She knew she would suffer if her partner died because the locals believed that young people perished only as a result of witchcraft and that the woman must not have loved him enough to pay the oracle to save him. It was also evil for a European's spouse to have a sexual relationship with a local man because if a black child resulted from it, her husband would sell her and her lover into slavery, unless her parents ransomed her. Römer adds the highly improbable claim that such wives, to avoid detection, would poison their husband before such a child was born, then kill the newborn baby and pretend it was stillborn.¹⁵⁸

The Dane's most important comments dealt with purely African traditions. He was, for example, curious about local religions, and was persuaded that "All the Negroes know there is a universal spirit who has created all things, and who directs, rules and sustains the world".¹⁵⁹ He also was told of subordinate gods of heaven, earth and the sea, and of spirits "who have created all the evil in the world, and would visit all the injury possible on humans if God and the fetish [oracle] did not

prevent it".¹⁶⁰ Römer called the chief such spirit the devil, and recalled seeing a small statue of it "both well fashioned and finely painted [very white], made of clay or resin (gum), and for the most part as our painters have depicted him, with a pair of horns on his head and a tail". It was usually decorated with feathers and hair.¹⁶¹

Another religious figure was a large black spider called Nanni, or trickster, who on God's orders wove cloth out of which God created the first human beings. Although children enjoyed tales of Nanni's scheming and swindling, spirits were created by God along with the first people to teach them the difference between good and evil and how to live piously and virtuously.¹⁶²

Römer knew an oracle who called himself God's messenger. A round hut with a thatched roof but no ceiling had been built for him near Christiansborg. It stood "in a pleasant place, planted with palms and other tall trees". Male and female priests lived nearby. They kept the house clean, supplied it with food and drink, and listened to the oracle's messages. In August, when the Gã New Year began, the oracle chose a night to appear in public, usually under a full moon, and the news quickly spread everywhere. The evening before his appearance, crowds gathered outside the hut with gifts of domestic animals and brandy. The oracle arrived at his home at close to 3 a.m. The local people, sitting in a large circle, fell to the ground and greeted him with slow clapping, words of welcome and appeals that he be good to them. The oracle blessed them, then began an oration. He scolded those who had committed evil deeds in the past year, and commended those who had lived virtuously. He spoke mostly in "parables" for up to an hour and a half in an archaic but still intelligible language, and used the same tongue to answer questions from the audience. He then drank some brandy, gave a special blessing to those who had brought bottles of it, and admonished them to behave well. Around 5 a.m., with dawn approaching, he walked away as the crowd howled.¹⁶³

New Year ceremonies in fact lasted three days, were attended by Europeans, and showed off the locals' love of music. Three drums played by old men were centrepieces, one so sacred it could only be played at this time of the year. All three drums had a long beard of raffia, smeared with red earth. The man who beat the sacred drum behaved as one possessed. He chose spectators to dance for him, holding on to the drum beard. No matter how old they were—some could

hardly walk—they danced “in a very respectful manner, and so rapidly, that you are amazed by it”. Spectators standing in a circle swayed in time with the dancer without moving from their places, and sang songs in the old language “in such a sad and melancholy voice and tone, mostly nasal, with so much of *hui! Ha ... ac ...* that it is impossible to describe or imagine what it sounds like”. European visitors were required to make an offering of about half a litre of brandy each.¹⁶⁴

Music was essential for enjoyment and for funerals, and drums were not the only instruments. Rømer described small horns hollowed out of elephant tusks as the most important. Sounds were blown through a hole near the pointed end. Both small and large horns accompanied the vocal music of dancers. Rømer said it was “the most pleasurable music for the Blacks but the most abominable for a European”. Long flutes were also used, blown through the thickest end. Three holes were cut toward the thin end, which meant they could produce three notes, and their octave comprised six notes in all. Another instrument was a hollow iron, beaten with an iron rod. Despite Rømer’s remark about Europeans detesting horn music, he himself broke with their customary distaste and highly recommended local music “as an innocent leisure activity and source of enjoyment”. He said it could counteract Europeans’ “surly moods ... depression and barbaric spirit to which we all fall prey against our will”.¹⁶⁵

According to Rømer, the local people abhorred any mention of death, and considered it the greatest evil that could befall one. They paid honour to the sun when it rose, and greeted the new moon with a ceremony in which they talked to it, shook their limbs and threw a firebrand in its direction.¹⁶⁶

In the Dane’s view, a black man’s wealth consisted only of his children and his slaves. The more he had, the more he was held in esteem. His other possessions were modest: “Some muskets and cartridge pouches, a couple of chests, some drinking basins, some calabashes, a couple of clay pots, a mirror ... [and] perhaps a cat and a dog. Anything else is unnecessary.”¹⁶⁷

Rømer had an eye for African female attire and decoration. As he put it:

When a prominent Negress in Accra wishes to dress up, this does not comprise just a beautiful cloth, together with small gold pendants and many types of beads, but chiefly the adornment of her head. On certain

parts ... they let their hair ... grow to finger length, and they form it into a roll at up to four places, and sometimes ... into one or more square pyramids. Other women let it grow like a cock's comb, and this fashion has innumerable variations. The pyramids are powdered with charcoal so that they attain the gleam of a blackness deeper than that of the Negresses' skin. When a prominent Negress is to be adorned for her birthday, which comes every week, ... she slaughters a ... chicken, then places its heart on a wooden stick on her forehead ... A Negress thus adorned feels herself just as fashionably well dressed as do our women who consult a barber and a hairdresser. Fully and properly dressed, a Negress will have eight or ten pieces of [Danish] coins hanging from a silver chain on either side of her hips, so that they can rattle and tinkle when she walks. Likewise, she will have silver spurs on her feet, and many keys at her sides ..., although she may own only one chest with a lock.¹⁶⁸

Rømer tells us all Accra male children were circumcised, some beyond the age of eight, and that otherwise they could never be considered men.¹⁶⁹ He is silent on what is now termed female genital mutilation, but Winsnes explains, in her book on Isert, that Gã females were spared the abuse.¹⁷⁰

The Dane had some harsh words for Africans, saying at one point that those he had to deal with "are surly and evil people who seek to cheat us or beg from us". But he added that "it is little better with the Europeans there". And on the same page he eulogized his black friends. If a European avoided death during his first year in Africa, he wrote, and learned to speak some Coast Portuguese:

he then becomes acquainted with a Black ... who becomes his friend and gives him advice for his benefit. The black friend might lend him an ounce of gold with which our White buys brandy from a French or Dutch ship, or tobacco from a Portuguese. His black friend smuggles it in to land for him, and the White hucksters it. For the money ... he receives he buys parrots, parakeets, monkeys, etc. These, in turn, are saleable goods for all the ships. If our White is lucky, there will be no lack of ships in the roads, so he can match his monthly salary by one hundred percent. He then repays his black friend ... Finally, he earns enough ... for the purchase of a slave. His black friend ... procures a slave for him [with commodities provided by the European, who] sells that slave to a ship, earning 50 percent.¹⁷¹

It sounds as if Rømer spoke from personal experience.

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Pieter Woortman

As far as I know, only one European survived longer than Lionel Abson on the West African coast during the eighteenth century. He was a German-born Dutchman named Pieter Woortman (who had changed his family name from Wortmann), and in all spent nearly half a century on the Gold Coast. Moreover, he reached the extraordinary age of 80 as director-general of the Dutch West India Company (WIC), their highest position in Africa. In nearly 250 years of the Company's existence, he filled that post (or its equivalent) longer than any other man but one, though it was for less than 13 years, far below Abson's 33 as William's Fort chief.¹⁷²

Born in 1700, Woortman is said to have joined the Dutch West India Company as a soldier in 1721, reached the rank of ensign in charge of a small Dutch fort by 1726, but then was demoted for some unknown reason and returned to Europe in 1729.¹⁷³ He married a Dutch girl in Groningen in 1730, and set up a business there. He and his wife, Elisabeth Carrier, had six children. After bankruptcy, which may have led to a brief stay in a debtors' prison, Woortman returned to the Gold Coast alone in 1741. Two of his four European sons, Jan and Hendrik, would eventually follow their father to the Gold Coast and join the Dutch West India Company. It is not clear whether Woortman ever divorced his Dutch wife, but he soon acquired what has been called a "common-law" African wife named Afodua, by whom he would have at least six more children.

Woortman's longevity would seem to bolster a surprising find by American Africanist Harvey M. Feinberg, a specialist in the history of Ghana's Elmina and its famous castle, which was built by the Portuguese in 1482 and much later served as Dutch headquarters.¹⁷⁴ As discussed in the Introduction, the death rate among Europeans based in West Africa was far higher than among the slaves they shipped to the New World. Feinberg reported that the Dutch death rate on the Gold Coast was significantly lower than that of other Europeans during the eighteenth century though still "substantially higher than rates for Europeans who stayed home".¹⁷⁵ As we've seen, about half the highest Dutch officials on the Gold Coast died despite the fact that they were often chosen from among men who had survived their first year in Africa, the deadliest time for European newcomers. One may assume

that they were also better fed and medically cared for than their European employees.

With this discrepancy in mind, it's hard to imagine that the overall death rate was significantly lower than that among other European companies in West Africa. Could the Dutch company have recorded lower death rates to attract more Europeans to West Africa? Statistics published by Feinberg suggest that there may very well have been some juggling of the figures of rank-and-file deaths by Company officials. Feinberg reported that 19 of 38, or 50 per cent, of Company director-generals or presidents in the eighteenth century died either in office or soon thereafter. They averaged only about 3½ years in office.¹⁷⁶

Rejoining Pieter Woortman, his long life and his rise to the highest Dutch post in West Africa were far from his only achievements. Like Richard Brew,¹⁷⁷ he fathered an African family that became prominent in Ghanaian history, but, unlike Brew, his white sons who followed him to the Gold Coast, his black wife and some of his biracial children all joined his private slave-trading and helped make him a very prosperous man.

After returning to Africa, Woortman was appointed captain of a Company ship with orders to cruise along the coastline between the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, about eight hundred nautical miles. He had to intercept Brazilian interlopers and escort them to Elmina, where the Dutch compelled them to pay for the right to trade, a penalty they had imposed on the Portuguese. Though he lacked naval experience, Woortman did his job so well that after two years he was promoted to the command of a small fort at Apam, between Elmina and Accra.¹⁷⁸ He remained there for 17 years, met and wed Afodua, and set up his lucrative slave-trading business. The Euro-African family would, in the words of Michel R. Doortmont, a leading Dutch Africanist, "eventually control an important segment of the Dutch slave-trading economy on the Gold Coast and beyond".¹⁷⁹

Woortman's success included slave-trading for the Dutch company, which is said to have contributed to his promotion, in 1763, to the governorship of Fort Crèvecoeur at Accra.¹⁸⁰ Four years later he became director-general at St George d'Elmina, "the most experienced ... the WIC ever had in Africa".¹⁸¹ Feinberg remarks on three "prime responsibilities" in the job: "promotion of trade, proper manning and

functioning of the forts [the Dutch had 15 on the Gold Coast],¹⁸² and the maintenance of peace among the Africans".¹⁸³

As Company head, Woortman earned an annual salary of 3,600 guilders, plus 3,840 guilders for what the British called "table allowance", financing meals offered to important visitors.¹⁸⁴ In comparison, Abson received £150 a year during his 33 years as William's Fort chief, which included his table allowance. With an exchange rate of 10–12 guilders to the pound, this meant the Dutchman earned at least twice as much in salary as the Yorkshireman. His duties as head of the crowded Company headquarters and busy port were, indeed, more demanding than Abson's.

Doortmont, the most knowledgeable scholar to explore Woortman's life, regards him as "intelligent ... insightful ... enterprising", a gifted diplomat and skilled in trade and government, along with unusual strength and stamina. He thinks his marriage into an African clan gave him "an unequalled political, economic, social-cultural, and psychological foundation". He observes that "despite the obvious benefits of [his] position for the wealth of [his] extended Euro-African family", senior Company officials and Dutch merchants never accused him of corruption or even nepotism during his years of directorship.¹⁸⁵ Doortmont also believes Woortman's professional interest lay in trade, and that the relaxation of Company regulations against private trade in the mid-1730s may partly explain his return to Africa in 1741.¹⁸⁶

Woortman's successful entry into private trade at Apam apparently owed much to Afodua, who was no maternal figurehead. She stayed with him to the end, an estimated 36-year relationship that may have been as rare among Europeans in West Africa as his longevity. Most white-black relationships were superficial or cut short by death or departure. According to Doortmont, Afodua's children also played a big role in Woortman's life.¹⁸⁷ One of her sons, Frederik Plange, was educated in the Netherlands.¹⁸⁸

Jan and Hendrik were important, too, but died before their father. Jan, born in 1730, accompanied his father to the Gold Coast in 1741, joined the Dutch company around the age of 18, worked his way up to the rank of trade commissioner and then commander in three different forts. He died in the third fort in 1777.

Hendrik, Pieter's youngest Dutch son, was born in 1740 and joined him in 1759. Well educated in Europe, he worked for several years in

the head office at Elmina, and finally for nine years as commander of the Apam fort, appointed by his father, who had, as noted, started his slave-trading there. A serious illness took him back to Holland in 1778, and he died the next year.

During Pieter's tenure as director-general from 1767 to his death in April 1780, his slave-trading business, in Doortmont's words, "reached gigantic proportions", with his two Dutch sons as his principal partners. Pieter's two eldest biracial sons, Jan (not to be confused with his European half-brother) and Balthasar Plange, were business partners who dealt with Africans. Two of Pieter's sons who had remained behind in Groningen, Pieter junior and Jacob Woortman, also supported the enterprise.

The main destination of the cargoes seems to have been Surinam, but Hendrik also sent slaves to the British West Indies. Pieter's slaves were marked "P.W." and Jan's "I.W.", probably with brands.¹⁸⁹

Pieter's elaborate funeral, fully described by Doortmont, reminds one of Abson's except that the only African participants appear to have been members of Woortman's family. Two of his native sons, in fact, "held the most prominent positions in the funeral train", preceding even Company officials.¹⁹⁰

Not long after Pieter's death, the Dutch West India Company organization in Africa collapsed and the Woortman empire with it. A major cause was the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, which broke out in December 1780, largely because of Dutch support for the American Revolution. It lasted until 1784, and while the Dutch successfully defended Elmina, several of their Gold Coast forts were destroyed, and they suffered other defeats worldwide. At the same time, slave-trading shifted away from the Gold Coast and Caribbean plantation economies crumbled. By the mid-1780s, the Company based at Elmina had, according to Doortmont, "become a poor institution that could hardly afford to pay local wages and services". Moreover, the deaths of Jan and Hendrik, besides that of their father, deprived the African side of the family of experienced Dutchmen who might have kept the business afloat.¹⁹¹

Doortmont calculates the value of Pieter's estate at well over \$3 million in 2016 value, and it was finally divided in 1793 among his surviving Dutch heirs. No provisions for Afodua and her children were made in Pieter's will. However, the house and property he had given

her in Elmina in 1767 remained hers, and Doortmont thinks it is possible he had made other arrangements for his African family that lay beyond Dutch control.¹⁹²

There is no doubt that Pieter was genuinely attached to the African part of his family. The very fact that he gave Afodua's children the surname of Plange is good evidence. It was his mother's maiden name, and he chose it to honour the matrilineal traditions of the Gold Coast's Akan peoples. Doortmont notes that Pieter appears to have remained true to Afodua through their long companionship, whereas most Europeans had relations with more than one local female. As far as Africa went, he was monogamous.¹⁹³

In all, Pieter's three oldest African sons served with the Dutch West India Company. This allowed them to live with their father in his Elmina fort headquarters, and while he didn't send them to school in Holland, as he did the youngest, he exposed them in this way to European social and cultural influences.¹⁹⁴

Doortmont attributes Pieter's successes to "his choices with regard to trade priorities, social and economic structures, and his personal political profile". In contrast to those Dutchmen who hastened to get rich from the slave trade and failed, he took his time planning his life.¹⁹⁵

His oldest African son, Jan Plange, began living with his father as a child but apparently did not receive a formal education since he signed his will in 1807 with a cross. However, he probably spoke Dutch from an early age and somehow mastered enough arithmetic to assist his father in trade and eventually become his business colleague. (As we've seen, it was not uncommon in West Africa for illiterate traders to astound European merchants with their remarkable memories for prices and exchanges of merchandise and slaves.) As Doortmont reports, by "his late twenties Jan Plange was a substantial trader in his own right".¹⁹⁶ In 1779, to procure trade goods, he gave his half-brother Hendrik Woortman, then living in Groningen, power of attorney, suggesting that the Euro-African family business was still functioning well.¹⁹⁷

Jan Plange seems to have been primarily involved in trading in European products, but he also kept a hand in the slave trade. For example, in the late 1780s he set up an apparent slaving enterprise in Jumba, his mother's home town. With his father out of the way, Dutch

company officials saw Jan as a strong competitor capable of undercutting the market for Dutch traders, and took steps to prevent it. An anonymous semi-official report with a racist agenda took a low view of biracial Africans and singled out Jan as “very wealthy, but in his lifestyle surpasses the worst negro in debauchery”.¹⁹⁸ In 1788 he was accused by a Dutch fort chief of transporting contraband goods. Afodua denied the accusation, and the president of the Council ruled in Jan’s favour, requiring the fort chief return the goods to him. For Doortmont, it shows how influential the Woortman–Plange clan still was, eight years after Pieter’s death.¹⁹⁹

Late in his life Jan moved to Elmina and seems to have strengthened the European connection with his family by linking his children to the Dutch government as “contractors”, though he himself preferred an African identity. But when he saw his life ebbing in 1807, he had a Dutch notary draw up his will to dispose of his merchandise in European style.

Dutch genes had been added to the family much earlier, in the early 1760s, when a rising Dutch West India Company official named Gillis Servaes Gallé wed Jannetje Plange, one of Jan’s sisters. Doortmont believes the match was promoted by her parents, Pieter and Afodua, “to strengthen and enhance their business interests”. Gallé commanded several forts, ending up as governor of a major one at Axim, west of Elmina, from 1780 to his death in 1787. While there, he served twice as president of the Elmina-based Council. One of his daughters married the son of a powerful Euro-African slave trader and Dutch company official in what Doortmont describes as “another relationship emphasizing the importance of familial, official, and economic relations for the Dutch and Euro-African mercantile groups on the Gold Coast”.²⁰⁰

Pieter Woortman’s favourite African son was Frederik Plange, born when his father was 65. He was the only member of Pieter’s African brood to be sent to the Netherlands for primary education and mercantile training. His European stay began in 1771, when he was only five or six years old, and ended in 1783 when he was about 18 and fatherless. He joined the Dutch West India Company and made extraordinarily quick progress, becoming a fort commander at 23. But his promising career ended with his death at 29, an age when local diseases

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might be expected to kill Europeans but not Africans, except for one who had spent most of his boyhood in Holland.²⁰¹

Pieter was not the only Woortman to father biracial children. His Dutch sons Jan and Hendrik also raised Euro-African families. Jan, in fact, did so simultaneously with two African women, one free, the other a slave, and even settled a daughter of the latter in the Netherlands; she eventually married a Dutchman. In his will, Jan generously endowed both his children and their mothers.²⁰² Hendrik went even further, sending one biracial daughter to Holland and later taking a second one with him when his health failed. The first married a Dutchman and the second occupied a big house in Groningen that Hendrik bought just before he died, but she followed him to the grave a decade later.²⁰³ Pieter's African daughter Johanna married a well-known Euro-African, son of a Dutch director-general.²⁰⁴

According to Doortmont, Pieter Woortman's African descendants, the Planges, "did remarkably well, both economically and socially". A "Madam Christina Plange, née Woortman," appears to have reached high social standing in the first half of the nineteenth century. But the Plange family really came to prominence late in the century with achievements in law, commerce and Christian ministry.²⁰⁵

Returning to Lionel Abson, had Adandozan let Sally and her three brothers find their own way, how many Absons would have embellished the history of Dahomey/Benin in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the Planges and Brews did in what became Ghana?

The Signares

Woortman's Afodua proved that an African woman could handle slave-trading as well as the men, but in West Africa it apparently was common only in Senegal, especially the small islands of Gorée and Saint-Louis in the second half of the eighteenth century. The fort on Gorée, well known for its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, had been founded by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century opposite the mainland where Senegal's capital Dakar stands today. The settlement of Saint-Louis, named after King Louis IX, 320 kilometres (200 miles) north of Gorée on the border with Mauritania, was founded by the French in the seventeenth century. It is near the mouth of the Senegal

River, which would become a major route for commerce. Both islands are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

According to Michel Jajolet de la Courbe, who commanded the French settlement at Saint-Louis in the late seventeenth century, females already controlled almost all the local trade.²⁰⁶ The women of both islands who married European merchants and officials according to local customs were called *Signares*, a word derived from the Portuguese words *senhora*, meaning lady, mistress or “a free woman of property and social consequence”,²⁰⁷ and *signora*, meaning female merchant. Women of both islands came from the Wolof ethnic group, Senegal’s largest. Europeans who had European spouses were required to leave them at home because of the mortal danger of disease. Those appointed to Senegal, mainly French but also British, Dutch and Portuguese, were often ordered by their sponsors not to cohabit with African women, but they overwhelmingly refused to comply.

The reason was obvious: they found Wolof girls quite attractive. An English chaplain named John Lindsay, who accompanied an expedition that captured Gorée from the French in 1758, during the Seven Years War, then visited Saint-Louis. He found its women:

and in particular the ladies (for so I must call many of those in [Saint-Louis]) they are in a surprizing degree handsome, have very fine features, are wonderfully tractable, remarkably polite both in conversation and manners; and in the point of keeping themselves neat and clean ... they far surpass the Europeans in every respect. They bath twice a day, upon every occasion they wash from all kinds of moisture; and in this particular have a very hearty contempt for all white people, who they imagine must be disagreeable, our women especially ... The appearance of the females on this occasion, was to me a novelty most pleasing. They were not only pretty, but in the dress in which they appear’d, were even desireable. Nor can I give you any drapery more nearly resembling theirs, than the loose, light, easy robe, and sandal, in which we see the female Grecian statues attir’d; most of which were of exceeding white cotton, spun, wove into narrow slips of six or seven inches, and sow’d together by themselves. Their hair, for it differs a little from wool, very neat and curiously plaited; and their persons otherways adorn’d, by earrings [*sic*], necklaces, and bracelets, of the purest gold ... If a female can be brought to like her suiter (who I shall suppose a European), and before her parents, and perhaps the [African] priest, will consent to live with him; to her ’tis a marriage, nor need the husband be afraid of her honesty.²⁰⁸

ABSON'S CONTEMPORARIES

Lindsay's observations of Signares were more than confirmed three decades later by Pruneau de Pommegorge, who began his African career in Senegal, including a stint as commander of the French fort at Saint-Louis. His 1789 book practically began with a description of the Signares of the island:

The women of this island are, in general, strongly attached to white men & give them the best care when they're sick. Most of them live in great ease, and several of these negresses own thirty to forty slaves, whom they partly rent to the [French] company. These [male] captives make a trip every year [up the Senegal River] to Galam as sailors: they bring back to their mistresses fifteen, twenty, & even thirty weight of duty-free gold, from the sale of two large barrels of salt. These women have some of the gold made into jewellery, & the other part is used to buy garments because they love finery, like women everywhere else. Their clothing, though very elegant, suits them very well. They wear a very artistically arranged white handkerchief on the head, over which they place a small narrow black or coloured ribbon around the head. An ornamented French-type shift, a taffeta or muslin corset; a skirt of the same material & like the corset, gold earrings, gold or silver anklets when they have no others, red morocco slippers on the feet; over their corset they wear a piece of two ells [about 90 inches long] of muslin, the ends of which dangle above the left shoulder. Thus dressed when they go out, they are followed by one or two girls who serve as their chambermaids, also well dressed but a little more lightly & a little less modestly by our standards. One becomes accustomed very quickly, however, to viewing these almost nude women without becoming scandalized.²⁰⁹

According to the late American historian George E. Brooks, Jr.,

many aspects of Pruneau de Pommegorge's account continue to be relevant in modern-day Senegal. Senegalese women still possess an unrivaled flair for displaying clothing, jewelry and other finery ... Gold from Galam is still the byword for quality and purity. The single white handkerchief headpiece ... evolved into [a] striking cone-shaped turban, artfully constructed with as many as nine colored handkerchiefs, that became the hallmark of *signares* in Senegal and The Gambia.

He noted that Signares were shielded from the sun on their promenades by parasols carried by young girls.²¹⁰

Besides Lindsay and Pruneau de Pommegorge, the prominent French naturalist Michel Adanson also visited Senegal during the mid-

eighteenth century and observed the Signares of Saint-Louis during five years of wildlife and botanical research. "Their skin", he wrote, "is surprisingly delicate and soft; their mouth and lips are small, and their features are regular. There are some of them perfect beauties." Adanson seemed to focus on the younger variety who had a half-pagne (loincloth) around their waist "but from the waist upward ... were naked. Being generally well made, they look very good in this deliberate undress, especially when a person is used to their colour: those who are not accustomed to them, must be content with admiring their shape, which is extremely fine." According to the late American scholar James F. Searing, Adanson acknowledged, however, that the Signares, who played such an important role in establishing contacts between European merchants and mainland African society, were simply the beneficiaries of the general attraction exercised by local women over lonely European men.²¹¹

A modern African scholar, Boubacar Barry, credits the Signares with "colossal personal fortunes" as well as important social roles.²¹² "Colossal" might seem exaggerated, but there is no doubt that many of them thrived financially. They owned not only slaves, sumptuous clothing and gold jewellery, but boats for river and coastal trade and extensive property. But mixed with the pleasures of their lives as partners of Europeans were heavy responsibilities. They had to supply water, food, clothes and shelter to their own slaves as well as those waiting to be shipped to the Americas. They hired extra hands to load and offload cargoes and protect merchants and trade goods, and taught their female slaves how to keep house. They kept up with their partners by learning French and joining the Catholic Church (though they did not abandon their Wolof beliefs and customs, and generally got along with their Muslim neighbours).

Their most important responsibility may have been producing offspring, and they were very fruitful. To promote their children, they hired tutors to teach them the French that would give them entry to European affairs. Both girls and boys were given their father's family name, another boost for their careers. The mothers raised a biracial (*métis*) group of girls who became a second generation of Signares (and who, I suspect, may have been even more appealing to Europeans). Their *métis* sons would monopolize relations between European and African traders as intermediaries, and attain other high posts.

While the transatlantic slave trade tapered off in the late eighteenth century, the number of slaves in Saint-Louis and Gorée increased. By 1755, Saint-Louis had a population of about 3,000, including 648 slaves. By the mid-1780s, the permanent population had reached between 5,000 and 6,000, with at least half of them slaves.²¹³ In Gorée, slaves numbered 131 in 1763, jumped to about 800 in 1767, and reached a total of between 1,100 and 1,200 in 1776.²¹⁴ Searing explains this as “new demands for slave labor within Africa” that caused slavers to predominate in the two islands. He said most of them were owned by local people, “dominated by *signares* and the mulatto families they founded”, who had emerged as “a local master class”. Searing added that “the key historic role of the *signares* was to set in motion a process of local accumulation which eventually created a distinct class of slave-owning merchants who were tied to the islands”. The families founded by the women and their European husbands became independent from the latter. “The *signare* household was female-dominated at least until a *signare*’s own sons reached maturity.”²¹⁵

Before the end of the eighteenth century, slaves were replaced as Senegal’s major export by gum Arabic, which was collected from acacia trees along the banks of the Senegal River, often by slaves of the Signares, and shipped to Europe. The gum, made from the hardened sap of various acacia species, proved to have a remarkable number of uses: for food and preserves, medicines, paint, ceramics, prints, glue, inks, cloth, cosmetics, book bindings, lithography, chewing gum, photos and various industrial applications.

The legal end of the Middle Passage was spurred by the French Revolution and sealed by the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, though violations continued for half a century. *Métis* descendants of the Signares clung to economic power during the first half of the nineteenth century, then were eclipsed by French metropolitan merchants. But as Wikipedia informs us, “the heritage of the Signares lives on in [Saint-Louis’] many festivals”.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/index.faces. Of more than 12,500,000 slaves shipped, around 1,800,000 failed to complete the journey, a death toll spread over three and a half centuries.
2. A list of top eighteenth-century officials of the Dutch West India Company on the Gold Coast mentioned one who survived 40 years. See Harvey M. Feinberg, “New data on European mortality in West Africa: the Dutch on the Gold Coast, 1719–1760”, *Journal of African History*, 15, no. 3 (1974), 369. He was later identified as Pieter Woortman, who actually survived nearly half a century in Africa and is the semifinal subject of Chapter 9.
3. F.H. Rankin, *White man’s grave*, 2 vols. (London, 1836), 1: viii, 3.
4. Philip D. Curtin, “‘The White Man’s Grave’: image and reality, 1780–1850”, *Journal of British Studies*, Nov. 1961, 102–3; *The image of Africa: British ideas and action, 1780–1850* (London, 1965), 483–4.
5. Feinberg, “New data”, 368.
6. K.G. Davies, “The living and the dead: white mortality in West Africa, 1684–1732”, in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, *Race and slavery in the Western Hemisphere: quantitative studies* (Princeton, 1975), 93–4.
7. James A. Rawley, *The transatlantic slave trade: a history* (New York, 1981), 285.
8. William St Clair, *The grand slave emporium: Cape Coast Castle and the British slave trade* (London, 2007), 103.
9. Carl Christian Reindorf, *The history of the Gold Coast and Asante*, reprint of 2nd ed. (Accra, 1966), 338. The book was first published in 1889 in Gã, a language of the Accra area, and in 1895 in English at Basel.

10. Georg Nørregård, *Danish settlements in West Africa, 1658–1850*, tr. Sigurd Mammen (Boston, 1966), 225.
11. Harvey M. Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans in West Africa: Elminans and Dutchmen on the Gold Coast during the eighteenth century* (Philadelphia, 1989), 36–8.
12. Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic slave trade, 1600–1815* (Cambridge, 1990), 66.
13. P.E.H. Hair, Adam Jones and Robin Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea: the writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678–1712*, 2 vols. (London, 1992), 2: 634.
14. Thomas Phillips, “A journal of a voyage made in the *Hannibal* of London, ann. 1693, 1694, from England, to Cape Monseradoe, in Africa, and thence along the coast of Guiney to Whidaw, the island of St. Thomas, and so forward to Barbadoes”, in Awnsham and John Churchill, *A collection of voyages and travels*, 6 vols. (London, 1732), 6: 215. Much of Phillips’s journal is also available in Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents illustrative of the history of the slave trade to America*, 4 vols. (Washington, 1930–5), 1: 392–410, with the above quotes on p. 399.
15. Davies, “Living and dead”, 90.
16. Rawley, *Transatlantic slave trade*, 286. The Bight of Benin consists of Atlantic waters off the Slave Coast.
17. Curtin, ““White Man’s Grave””, 95.
18. Pieter de Marees, *Description and historical account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602)*, tr. and ed. Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones (Oxford, 1987), 196–200, first published in Dutch in Amsterdam in 1602. See also Olfert Dapper, *Description de l’Afrique* (Amsterdam, 1686), 294, first published in Dutch in 1668; Hair, Jones and Law, *Barbot on Guinea*, 2: 575–7; William (Willem) Bosman, *A new and accurate description of the coast of Guinea, divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts*, new ed. (London, 1967), 109, first published in Dutch in 1704 and English in 1705; Selena Axelrod Winsnes, tr. and ed., *Letters on West Africa and the slave trade: Paul Erdmann Isert’s journey to Guinea and the Caribbean islands in Columbia (1788)* (Oxford, 1992), 144–5, first published in German in Copenhagen in 1788.
19. Curtin, ““White Man’s Grave””, 102.
20. Eveline C. Martin, *The British West African settlements, 1750–1821: a study in local administration*, reprint (New York, 1970), 41, first published in London in 1927, quoting a 1778 letter from Richard Miles to a predecessor as Cape Coast Castle governor. For Miles, see n. 26 of Introduction.
21. *Ibid.*, 41–2.

22. Curtin, "White Man's Grave", 105–9; *Image of Africa*, 303, 355–8, 486.
23. Davies, "Living and dead", 98.
24. Martin, *Settlements*, 38.
25. Archibald Dalziel, *The history of Dahomy, an inland kingdom of Africa; compiled from authentic memoirs*, reprint (London, 1967), vi–vii of preface, first published in London in 1793; John Adams, *Remarks on the country extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo*, reprint (London, 1966), 52, first published in London in 1823; Robin Law, *Ouidah: the social history of a West African slaving 'port,' 1727–1892* (Athens, OH, and Oxford, 2004), 75. The formal name of the Fon language is Fongbe.
26. Arnold Walter Lawrence, *Fortified trade-posts: the English in West Africa, 1645–1822* (London, 1969), 61. Lawrence, a brother of (T.E.) Lawrence of Arabia, taught classical archaeology at Cambridge.
27. The unvarying cost was recorded as 1 and 7/8 gold ounces, a unit of account in the West African slave trade. For the conversion to cowries, see Robin Law, "The gold trade of Whydah in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries", in David Henige and T.C. McCaskie, eds., *West African economic and social history* (Madison, 1990), 112–15.
28. ANOM, C6/27, Pierre-Simon Gourg, "Mémoire pour servir d'instruction au directeur qui me succédera au Comptoir de Juda", 1791, 10. The linguistically challenged Lusitanian was Francisco Antonio da Fonseca e Aragão.
29. The castle was captured by the English from the Dutch in 1664, became the African headquarters of the Royal African Company and its successor, the Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa, and is preserved as a UNESCO World Heritage Site because of its role in the slave trade.
30. T70/1545, Abson to Richard Miles, 14 Dec. 1782, and 26 Sept. 1783. Miles spent 18½ years on the Gold Coast, more than five as governor. He has been described as "the most energetic and enterprising" Cape Coast Castle governor of the eighteenth century, and as "a cultivated man, who could speak Fanti", the principal coastal language of the Gold Coast, now called with its speakers and country Fante, who number 2½ million. Martin, *Settlements*, 43; Hugh Thomas, *The slave trade, the history of the Atlantic slave trade: 1440–1870* (London and New York, 1997), 293; Reindorf, *History*, 339. Hereafter, he will be identified simply as Miles in the text and notes. See Margaret Priestley, *West African trade and coast society: a family study* (London, 1969) and St Clair, *Grand slave emporium*, for many references to him.
31. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 21 Oct. 1783; 14 Dec. 1782.
32. Adams, *Remarks*, 53–4.
33. John M'Leod, *A voyage to Africa with some account of the manners and cus-*

- toms of the Dahomian people*, reprint (London, 1966), 78–9, first published in London in 1820.
34. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782; 20 Nov. 1783. In the former document he maintained: “I have not had a Sheet of Paper from C. Coast these 6 or 7 Years past.” If so, he must have been buying or cadging stationery from visiting European traders or from his French or Portuguese associates.
 35. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 10 March 1783.
 36. See Chapter 2.
 37. Dalzel, *History*, 155, 164.
 38. *Ibid.*, preface, vi–vii.
 39. Winsnes, *Letters*, 6–7, 88–111.
 40. Robert Cornevin, *La République Populaire du Bénin des origines dahoméennes à nos jours* (Paris, 1981), 264.
 41. ADM 1/1506, Paget Bayly, Commander of His Majesty’s Sloop the Scorpion, and Abson, “Observations on the state and conditions of [William’s] fort and the trade thereof”, 29 March 1788; Bayly, from Barbados to the Admiralty, 21 May 1788.
 42. Simone Berbain, *Le Comptoir français de Juda (Ouidah) au XVIIIe siècle*, reprint (Amsterdam, 1968), 120, first published in Paris in 1942.
 43. *Mémorial de l’Artillerie de la Marine*, vol. 20 (Paris, 1892), 758, 760.
 44. Pierre Verger, *Trade relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia from the 17th to 19th century*, tr. Evelyn Crawford (Ibadan, 1976), 210, first published in Paris in 1968. According to Verger, the man Deniau designated, Pierre Bonon, had been fort storekeeper for 30 years. He stayed on though his salary was stopped and he was never named governor, nor was anyone else.
 45. Martin, *Settlements*, 37–8.
 46. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 26 Sept. 1783.
 47. Dalzel, *History*, 196.
 48. A recent study of Greece in the time of Socrates puts the proportion of slaves in democratic Athens as at least one-third of the population and possibly one-half, and describes their status as “subhuman”. Bettany Hughes, *The hemlock cup: Socrates, Athens and the search for the good life* (New York, 2012), 182, 292.
 49. St Clair, *Grand slave emporium*, 88.
 50. Translated from the German by Reuters and Voice of America News on 9 Nov. 2014.
 51. Estimates of the number of slaves worldwide now range from 21 to 36 million.
 52. T70/33, Dalzel to Abson, 30 Jan. 1793.
 53. Adams, *Remarks*, 53.

54. Review of Christa Wolf's *City of Angels* in the *International Herald Tribune*, 23–24 Feb. 2013.
55. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, c. Nov. 1782.
56. Judith Shulevitz, *New York Times Book Review*, 30 Jan. 2011, 16.
57. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 30 Dec. 1783.
58. T70/1545, Abson probably to Miles, 28 Nov. 1782. See also T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782, 26 Sept. 1783, 20 Nov. 1783, and 30 Dec. 1783, for references to Kpengla.
59. T70/31, Abson to David Mill, 24 Oct. 1770. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of cowrie money.
60. Ibid.
61. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 10 Sept. 1782.
62. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 11 Aug. 1783; 30 Dec. 1783.
63. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 10 March 1783.
64. See Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550–1750: the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on an African society* (Oxford, 1991), 195.
65. T70/1560, Abson to Thomas Miles, 15 April 1790. Thomas, a brother of Richard Miles, headed the English fort at Anomabu on the Gold Coast and was vice-president of the Cape Coast Castle Council.
66. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 July 1783. Thirteen years earlier a “Black Surgeon” from the French fort, possibly the same person, had successfully treated Erasmus Williams, Abson’s immediate predecessor as English fort chief, but Williams had then ignored the doctor’s dietary prescription and succumbed (T70/31, Abson to Mill, 24 Oct. 1770). Conceivably the black physician was French or at least French-educated, but that would have been highly unusual for the time.
67. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 July 1783.
68. T70/1162, William’s Fort Day Book for July–Sept. 1779. (Hereafter, footnote references to the Day Books will leave out “William’s Fort”.) See also I.A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its neighbours 1708–1818* (Cambridge, 1967), 159.
69. T70/1163, Day Book for July–Dec. 1803.
70. Law, *Ouidah*, 74, 204. A British gunner named Raymond Cuillie with Abson-like stamina, who joined the William’s Fort’s staff in 1779 and was still serving when the fort was abandoned in 1812, may also be the ancestor of an extant Ouidah family. Ibid., 162.
71. T70/1545 Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782.
72. Adams, *Remarks*, 52–3.
73. Ibid., 55.
74. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782.
75. Miles is said to have had seven children by his “wench” and is thought to have taken a son and possibly a daughter to England. Priestley, *West*

- African trade*, 107; Thomas, *Slave trade*, 349. According to Thomas, Miles continued slave-dealing in London and became “the most powerful merchant [there] at the end of the eighteenth century”. *Ibid.*, 293, 349.
76. George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (London, 1967), 23, 37, 40, 181, 193, first published in New York in 1934.

1. THE ENGLISH FORT

1. M’Leod, *Voyage*, 25–7.
2. Edna G. Bay, *Wives of the leopard: gender, politics, and culture in the kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville, VA, and London, 1998), 48, 71–8.
3. Dalzel, *History*, 200.
4. Berbain, *Comptoir*, 55–6.
5. Pierre Verger, *Le Fort St Jean-Baptiste d’Ajuda* (Porto-Novo, Benin, 1966), 115.
6. Winsnes, *Letters*, 97.
7. Robin Law, ed., *The English in West Africa, 1685–1688: the local correspondence of the Royal African Company of England 1681–1699*, part 2 (Oxford, 2001), 338.
8. T70/1162, Day Book for Jan.–March 1779; ADM 1/2131, naval inspection report, 15 Aug. 1795.
9. ANOM, DFC, Côte d’Afrique, no. 111, carton 75, “Réflexions sur Juda par les Srs De Chenevert et abbé [Charles-Pierre-Joseph] Bullet”, 1 June 1776, 24, 33. A detailed map of the French fort made by Bullet the same year and containing extensive captions rounded off the figure of French slaves to 200. Pierre Labarthe, a French official who visited Ouidah in 1788, tells us the final count of French fort slaves was 207 in 1797. He copied the figures for the English and Portuguese forts from De Chenevert and Bullet. *Voyage à la côte de Guinée ...* (Paris, 1803), 111–12.
10. Winsnes, *Letters*, 104; Law, *Ouidah*, 83.
11. Winsnes, *Letters*, 97. According to Isert, the French and Portuguese forts had their powder magazines in the same location and form.
12. Berbain, *Comptoir*, 63.
13. Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the reign of Bossa Ahádee, king of Dahomy, an inland country of Guiney ...*, reprint (London, 1968), 42, first published in London in 1789; Law, *Ouidah*, 93.
14. Berbain, *Comptoir*, 62, 85. The cloth was woven in Silesia and ordered from Hamburg. The French and English would copy it.
15. Law, *Ouidah*, 36. See also Winsnes, *Letters*, 97.
16. Adams, *Remarks*, 51.

17. Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie* (Amsterdam, 1789), 168–9; Alain Sinou, *Le Comptoir de Ouidah, une ville africaine singulière* (Paris, 1995), 94; ANOM, C6/27bis, abbé Bullet, “Mémoires de 1772”.
18. Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Voyage du chevalier Des Marchais en Guinée, isles voisines, et à Cayenne, fait en 1725, 1726 & 1727*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1730), 2: 46–7. An English visitor around 1700 put the height of the fort wall at about six feet, but later mention of a wall of “considerable” height suggests the level was raised. Thomas, *Slave trade*, 354.
19. Ibid.
20. Jean Doublet, *Journal du corsaire Jean Doublet de Honfleur, lieutenant de frégate sous Louis XIV*, ed. Charles Bréard (Paris, 1887), 255–6; Berbain, *Comptoir*, 39.
21. Verger, *Fort St Jean-Baptiste*, 16; *Trade relations*, 109–13.
22. Labat, *Voyage*, 2: 43; William Snelgrave, *A new account of some parts of Guinea and the slave-trade*, reprint (London, 1971), 19, 115–17, first published in London in 1734; William Smith, *A new voyage to Guinea ...*, reprint (London, 1967), 169, first published in London in 1744.
23. Snelgrave, *New account*, 16–17.
24. Winsnes, *Letters*, 96–7.
25. Sinou, *Comptoir*, 90.
26. Labat, *Voyage*, 2: 109–13; Law, *Ouidah*, 36–7 and n. 124. Des Marchais himself signed the treaty in 1704.
27. Labarthe (*Voyage*, 102, 116) put the Dahomean coast at seven French leagues, or about 17 miles.
28. Verger, *Fort St Jean-Baptiste*, 27. The official was the Viceroy of Brazil, then based in Bahia.
29. Law, *Ouidah*, 36. The French apparently preferred to call their fort a trading post (*comptoir*).
30. M’Leod, *Voyage*, 34–7.
31. Labarthe, *Voyage*, 100, 110–11; Law, *Ouidah*, 34–5.
32. Labarthe, *Voyage*, 112.
33. Ibid. Labarthe, who researched documents in Paris sent by directors of the French fort, would seem to have been influenced by Ollivier de Montaguère, discussed in Chapter 5.

2. THE COMPANY

1. K.G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (London, 1957), 348–9.
2. Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic slave trade: a census* (Madison, 1969), 150.
3. David Eltis and David Richardson, eds., *Extending the frontiers: essays on the new transatlantic slave trade database* (New Haven, 2008), 32, 40.

- Portuguese slavers were second to the British with 2,213,003 souls embarked.
4. Donnan, *Documents*, 2: 474. From pp. 474 to 485, Donnan gives us the text of the parliamentary Act creating the Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa.
 5. *Ibid.*, 2: 476.
 6. *Ibid.*, 2: 481.
 7. Martin, *Settlements*, 39–40, quoting T70/69, Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa to Board of Trade, 30 June 1764.
 8. *Ibid.*, 42.
 9. ADM 1/1988, naval inspection reports of 5 March 1789, and 28 Feb. 1790; T70/1163, Day Book for 1 Jan.–30 June 1790.
 10. See Stanley B. Alpern, “Did they or didn’t they invent it: iron in sub-Saharan Africa,” *History in Africa*, 32 (2005), 73–5.
 11. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 2 Sept. 1783.
 12. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 28 Nov. 1782.
 13. Berbain, *Comptoir*, 79.
 14. Bosman, *New and accurate description*, 352.
 15. Labat, *Voyage*, 2: 221.
 16. ANOM, BIB SOM d5214, “Mémoire sur le commerce de la concession du Sénégal” (1752), 183. Pruneau de Pommegorge had served two tours of duty at the French fort earlier as well as elsewhere in West Africa and had written a 247-page anonymous manuscript that has been traced to Joseph Pruneau, apparently his original name.
 17. Gourg, “Mémoire”, 769.
 18. M’Leod, *Voyage*, 89. Similar remarks by European visitors about the cleverness of West African traders date all the way back to the early sixteenth century. Even the Victorian polymath Richard F. Burton, notorious for his generally low esteem of Africans, granted that the Dahomeans possessed a “prodigious memory for trifles”. *A mission to Gelele, king of Dahome*, 2 vols. (London, 1864), 1: 250.
 19. A.-L. Vallon, “Le Royaume de Dahomey”, *Revue Maritime et Coloniale*, Aug. 1861, 336–7.
 20. Davies, *Royal African Company*, 235.
 21. Marion Johnson, *Anglo-African trade in the eighteenth century: English statistics on African trade 1699–1808*, eds. Thomas Lindblad and Robert Ross (Leiden, 1990), 9, 27.
 22. *Ibid.*, 29.
 23. In 1782 Abson ranked them with cowries and iron bars as the most important items he received from Cape Coast Castle. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 28 Nov.
 24. Berbain, *Comptoir*, 113, 118.
 25. Donnan, *Documents*, 1: 404.

26. Gomer Williams, *History of the Liverpool privateers and letters of marque with an account of the Liverpool slave trade, 1744–1812*, reprint (Liverpool and Montreal, 2004), 551, first published in London in 1897.
27. Dalzel, *History*, 33. They were misspelled “manellos”. Dalzel also mentions manillas made by local smiths. *Ibid.*, Introduction, xxv.
28. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 30 Dec. 1783.
29. M’Leod, *Voyage*, 35.
30. Johnson, *Anglo-African trade*, 9.
31. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and civilization* (New York, 1934), 76.
32. Berbain, *Comptoir*, 77.
33. Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, *The shell money of the slave trade* (Cambridge, 1986), 6, 62.
34. *Ibid.*, 69–79.
35. Labarthe, *Voyage*, 208, 84.
36. Anonymous, *Le commerce de l’Amérique par Marseille ...*, 2 vols. (Avignon, 1764), 2: 387. Berbain, *Comptoir*, 43 n. 3, 79, attributes the book to V. Chambon.
37. John Joseph Crooks, *Records relating to the Gold Coast settlements from 1750 to 1874* (Dublin, 1923), 73.
38. Johnson, *Anglo-African trade*, 9.
39. Verger, *Trade relations*, 12, 24.
40. Labarthe, *Voyage*, 100, 112–13, 136–7, 143–4.
41. In an effort “to destroy the Portuguese advantage” in the Ouidah trade, tobacco was planted in the French fort’s garden and cigars were produced to show Dahomeans they could grow the plant themselves, all to no avail. ANOM, C6/26, Gourg to Minister of Colonies, 24 Jan. 1789.
42. Verger, *Trade relations*, 11–28; Pierre Verger, *Bahia and the West Coast trade (1549–1851)* (Ibadan, 1964), 7–9.
43. William Enfield, *An essay towards the history of Liverpool ...*, 2nd ed. (London, 1774), 85, first published in Warrington in 1773.
44. Berbain, *Comptoir*, 77, 80.
45. On slave-ship merchandise in general, see Stanley B. Alpern, “What Africans got for their slaves: a master list of European trade goods”, *History in Africa*, 22 (1995), 5–43.

3. OUIDAH

1. Hair, Jones and Law, *Barbot on Guinea*, 2: 635–6.
2. Robin Law, ed., *The English in West Africa, 1681–1683: the local correspondence of the Royal African Company of England, 1681–1699*, part 1 (London, 1997), 218–19.

3. Eltis and Richardson, *Extending the frontiers*, 46–7.
4. Law, *Ouidah*, 2. Earlier, Norwegian Africanist Finn Fuglestad estimated that “at least three quarters, if not more, of some 1.5 to 2 million slaves exported from the Slave Coast passed through the town of Ouidah”. “Le Questionnement du ‘port’ de Ouidah (Côte des Esclaves)”, in Øystein Rian, Finn Erhard Johannsen, Øystein Sorensen and Finn Fuglestad, eds., *Revolusjon og resonnement: festskrift til Kåre Tønnesson på 70-årsdagen den 1. januar 1996 cop. 1995* (Oslo, 1995), 128.
5. *Ibid.*, 42, 73; Norris, *Memoirs*, 62. Berbain (*Comptoir*, 55) thinks the population may have reached 10,000. After his 1788 visit, Labarthe reckoned only 2,000 inhabitants, perhaps reflecting a sharp decline due to slave-trade shrinkage (*Voyage*, 113).
6. Hair, Jones and Law, *Barbot on Guinea*, 2: 634.
7. Phillips, “Journal”, 214, 216.
8. Bosman, *New and accurate description*, 339–40.
9. *Ibid.*, 389–94.
10. Erick Tilleman, *A short and simple account of the country Guinea and its nature*, tr. and ed. Selenia Axelrod Winsnes (Madison, 1994), 34, first published in Danish in 1697. It was the first book to speak of the “Slave Coast”.
11. Smith, *New voyage*, 184, and Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans: being the journals of two missions to the king of Dahomey, and residence at his capital in the years 1849 and 1850*, 2 vols., reprint (London, 1966), 1: 191, first published in London in 1851. Lamb is sometimes spelled Lambe.
12. Snelgrave, *New account*, 3.
13. John Atkins, *A voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West Indies in His Majesty’s ships the Swallow and Weymouth*, reprint (London, 1970), 112, first published in London in 1735.
14. Smith, *New voyage*, 169, 194–5.
15. Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description*, 236–41.
16. I.A. Akinjogbin, “Archibald Dalzel: slave trader and historian of Dahomey”, *Journal of African History*, 7, no. 1 (1966), 70. But Dalzel contradicted himself in the introduction to his *History* (p. ii) by claiming that the “captivating picture of beauty and fertility” drawn by authors like Bosman and Smith changed considerably after the Dahomean conquest of 1727.
17. Norris, *Memoirs*, 66–7.
18. Winsnes, *Letters*, 104–5.
19. Labarthe, *Voyage*, 113, 153–60. Abbé Bullet had already reported guava and cashew trees in the French fort’s big garden in the notes to his 1776 plan. Berbain (*Comptoir*, 56) tells us that garden was about 250

- metres long, or 273 yards. Isert claimed the French fort kept 120 blacks just to maintain its gardens in 1785 (Winsnes, *Letters*, 105).
20. Adams, *Remarks*, 61.
 21. M'Leod, *Voyage*, 12–13, 17–18, 20–1, 24–5.
 22. Stanley B. Alpern, "The European introduction of crops into West Africa in precolonial times", *History in Africa*, 19 (1992), 24–30; "Exotic plants of western Africa: where they came from and when", *History in Africa*, 35 (2008), 65–71, 75–6, 78–9.
 23. Bosman, *Description*, 376–7.
 24. Phillips, "Journal", 223.
 25. A. Répin, a French naval surgeon who visited Ouidah in 1856, may have been the first writer to identify the serpent as a python in "Voyage au Dahomey", *Le Tour du Monde*, 7 (2nd semester, 1863), 72. See also Burton, *Mission*, 1: 93–4.
 26. Johannes Rask, *A brief and truthful description of a journey to and from Guinea*, tr. and ed. Selena Axelrod Winsnes (Legon, Ghana, 2009), 99, 153, 183, first published posthumously in Danish in Trondheim, Norway, in 1754.
 27. Labat, *Voyage*, 2: 180, 185–6.
 28. Adams, *Remarks*, 70–1.
 29. Burton, *Mission*, 1: 198–9.
 30. Labat, *Voyage*, 2: 182, 187–8.
 31. Stanley B. Alpern, *Amazons of Black Sparta: the women warriors of Dahomey*, new ed. (London and New York, 2011), 209, first published in 1998.
 32. Snelgrave, *New account*, 11–12.
 33. Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description*, 195–8.
 34. Norris, *Memoirs*, 2, 105 n.
 35. Law, *Ouidah*, 97. See also Labarthe, *Voyage*, 130–2, on the snake worship.
 36. Phillips, "Journal", 224.
 37. Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description*, 201.
 38. John Duncan, *Travels in western Africa in 1845 and 1846*, 2 vols. reprinted in 1 vol. (New York and London, 1967), 1: 124–5, first published in London in 1847.
 39. Burton, *Mission*, 1: 81–3.
 40. J.A. Skertchly, *Dahomey as it is; being a narrative of eight months' residence in that country* (London, 1974), 469–70.
 41. A.B. Ellis, *The Ewe-speaking peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa ...*, reprint (Oosterhout, Holland, 1966), 41, 43–4, first published in London in 1890.
 42. *Ibid.*, 45.

43. Robert D. Pelton, *The trickster in West Africa: a study of mythic irony and sacred delight* (Berkeley, 1989), 72.
44. Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits, *Dahomean narrative: a cross-cultural analysis* (Evanston, IL, 1958), 126.
45. Auguste Le Hérissé, *L'Ancien Royaume du Dahomey: mœurs, religion, histoire* (Paris, 1911), 139.
46. Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey, an ancient West African kingdom*, 2 vols. (New York, 1938), 2: 125–6.
47. *Ibid.*, 2: 223.
48. Hughes, *Hemlock cup*, 28, 37, 42, 43, 172.

4. ABSON'S ORIGINS

1. The five dates are in T70/1545 messages from Abson to Miles.
2. T70/31, Abson to Mill, 24 Oct. 1770. This could have meant maize, but could also have been an African-domesticated grain like millet or sorghum since corn refers to cereals in general in British parlance.
3. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782.
4. T70/1551, Abson to Joseph Fayzer, 20 Sept. 1784.
5. T70/1545, Abson to Richard Savage, 1 Jan. 1782.
6. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782.
7. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 161. I would not have described the king and other high officials indebted to Abson as “needy”.

5. EARLY CAREER

1. T70/1160, Day Book for May–June 1767. Dalzel then called himself Dalziel, testified before a London committee on the slave trade in 1789 as Dalzell, and soon thereafter settled on Dalzel as his family name.
2. T70/31, Dalzel to Gilbert Petrie, governor of Cape Coast Castle, undated but probably written between Oct. 1767 and March 1768.
3. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782; undated but probably March–April, 11 Aug. and 26 Sept. 1783; 1 Jan. 1784.
4. T70/31, Dalzel to Petrie, c. Oct. 1767–March 1768.
5. T70/31, Dalzel to Petrie, 17 March 1768. The “free People” Dalzel mentions may have been labourers brought in for major repair work and at least temporarily lodged in the fort.
6. T70/31, Dalzel to Committee, 27 Sept. 1768.
7. T70/1160, Day Book for Jan.–March 1770.
8. T70/1160, Day Book for 11 Aug. to 30 Sept. 1770.
9. T70/31, Mill to Committee, 19 Nov. 1770.
10. Martin, *Settlements*, 33–7. The Council’s composition varied over time, but the Ouidah chief was officially included for only two years, 1778–80, and Abson does not seem to have taken part in any session.

11. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 216–19; Cornevin, *République Populaire du Bénin*, 263–4.
12. Snelgrave, *New account*, 122–34. See also Dalzel, *History*, 54–8; Law, *Slave Coast*, 304–5, and *Ouidah*, 55–6. Testefole's name would seem to be related to the French name Folletête, meaning, appropriately, crazy head.
13. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 88, 218.
14. T70/31, Abson to Mill, 24 Oct. 1770.
15. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782.
16. Regarding this historical confusion, Robin Law thinks the Popos who sided with the Hueda after their 1727 defeat by Dahomey were from Grand Popo, and those mentioned from the 1740s on were from Little Popo, called Aného in modern Togo. *Ouidah*, 60 n. 58.
17. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 26 Sept. and 30 Dec. 1783.
18. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782.
19. T70/1565, an undated and unattributed document, apparently from 1792.
20. T70/1162, Day Book for Jan.–March 1779; T70/1163, Day Book for 1801.
21. T70/1162, Day Book for July–Sept. 1779.
22. Under Dalzel, slaves reportedly made thousands of bricks using sea-shells for lime and charcoal for burning, rather than West Africa's traditional bricks made of sun-dried mud. But the non-acceptance of his plan to reconstruct William's Fort seems to have ended that programme. See T70/31, Dalzel to Petrie, 17 March 1768.
23. Law, *Slave Coast*, 261. In another publication, Law says Norris's *Memoirs* "clearly have immense historiographical significance, as the first serious attempt by a European to write the history of a west African state". "The slave-trader as historian: Robert Norris and the history of Dahomey", *History in Africa*, 16 (1989), 219.
24. Norris, *Memoirs*, 60, repeated in Dalzel, *History*, 105.
25. Law, *Ouidah*, 64.
26. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 153, 158. See also C.W. Newbury, *The western Slave Coast and its rulers* (Oxford, 1961), 25.
27. T70/1161, Day Books for Jan.–March, April–June and July–Sept. 1772.
28. T70/1161, Day Books for Jan.–March and April–June 1773.
29. T70/1161, Day Book for Jan.–March 1777.
30. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782. Abson appears to have been thinking of succeeding Miles at Cape Coast Castle when the latter's tour ended.
31. *Ibid.* These debts were supposed to be paid in slaves.
32. *Ibid.*

33. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 26 Sept. 1783.
34. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 18 Oct. 1783.
35. Dalzel, *History*, 171–3.
36. Some twentieth-century sources say his first name was Joseph. Casimir Agbo, dit Alidji, *Histoire de Ouidah du XVIe au XXe siècle* (Avignon, 1959), 217; *Mémoire du Bénin (matériaux d'histoire)*, no. 2 (Cotonou, Bénin, 1993), 58–9; Robin Law, “The origins and evolution of the merchant community in Ouidah”, in Law and Silke Strickrodt, eds., *Ports of the slave trade (Bigths of Benin and Biafra)* (Stirling, 1999), 59.
37. ANOM, C6/27, Ollivier de Montaguère, “Projet d’Établissement à la Côte d’Afrique”, 25 June 1786, 4–5, 10–11.
38. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 14 Dec. 1782, 30 July 1783. Ollivier was the first part of the Frenchman’s family name, not his first name, which the French would spell Olivier.
39. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 26 Sept. 1783.
40. T70/1545, Miles to Abson, 5 Sept. 1783.
41. ANOM, C6/26, Sept.–Oct. 1787.
42. Gourg, “Mémoire”, 11.
43. Montaguère, “Projet”, 10–11.
44. Direction des Archives Nationales du Bénin, *Mémoire du Bénin (matériaux d'histoire)*, no. 2 (Cotonou, 1993), 58–9.
45. Crooks, *Records*, 72.
46. *Ibid.*
47. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 10 March 1783; undated but probably written in late March or April 1783; 14 July 1783, 30 July 1783, 26 Sept. 1783, 30 Dec. 1783. Penal transportation came to much wider attention with the transfer of British convicts to Australia beginning in 1788.
48. Dalzel, *History*, 217–21.
49. *Ibid.*, first introduction, 17.
50. T70/1161, Day Books for April–June 1777, July–Sept. 1778; T70/1162, Oct.–Dec. 1778, April–June 1780, Oct.–Dec. 1785; T70/1163, Day Book, July–Sept. 1786.
51. Dalzel, *History*, 156–230.
52. *Ibid.*, 158–63.
53. *Ibid.*, 171.
54. *Ibid.*, preface, xi. See Stanley B. Alpern, “Dahomey’s royal road”, *History in Africa*, 26 (1999), 13.
55. Forbes, *Dahomey*, 2: 88; Burton, *Mission*, 1: 174. Burton copied Abson without giving him credit.
56. Alpern, “Royal road”, 11–24.
57. Dalzel, *History*, 173–7; Alpern, *Amazons*, 34, 147; Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 162 and n. 3, 163 and n. 1; T70/1162, Day Book for Jan.–March

- 1779; Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire c.1600–c.1836* (Oxford, 1977), 167 and n. 118.
58. Dalzel, *History*, 166.
 59. Badagry later achieved notoriety as the place where Richard Lander, who with his brother John was to trace the Niger River to the Atlantic in 1830, was forced by the local ruler to undergo a poisonous ordeal on suspicion of plotting against him. He is said to have survived “by the prompt use of a powerful emetic”. Robin Hallett, ed., *The Niger journal of Richard and John Lander* (London, 1965), 8–9, 45 n. 1, journal first published in London and New York in 1832.
 60. Dalzel, *History*, 179–91. Abson did not explain why the 6,000 heads purportedly available did not suffice for the palace walls, which suggests an error in the transcription of his “communications” to Dalzel. Fage points out that Dalzel left his manuscript in the hands of an editor identified only as “J.F.” before it was ready for the press because he returned to Africa in 1792 for what proved to be a 10-year stint as Cape Coast Castle governor. He therefore may not have had a chance to proofread the 1793 book. See *ibid.*, first introduction, 8, 13–14.
 61. *Ibid.*, 206.
 62. HL/PO/JO/10/3/282/59, “State and condition of William’s Fort Whydah”, 27 March 1788; T70/33, Cape Coast Castle Governor and Council to Committee, 20 Jan. 1789; ADM 1/1988, “State and condition of William’s Fort Whydah”, 5 March 1789.
6. DECLINE
1. T70/1545, Abson to Miles, 30 Dec. 1783.
 2. T70/33, Cape Coast Castle Governor and Council to Committee, 20 Aug. 1789.
 3. Labarthe, whose brief Ouidah visit coincided with Gourg’s command of the French fort, described Kpengla as a sanguinary and highly despotic ruler who spent most of his time in his harem (*Voyage*, 100, 117–18).
 4. Dalzel, *History*, 227–8.
 5. *Ibid.* But Gourg’s 1791 memoir to his successor (see p. 5) could have been written on his way home in 1789.
 6. T70/1560, Abson to Cape Coast Castle, 20 April 1790; Law, “Gold trade”, 115.
 7. T70/1560, Abson to Cape Coast Castle, 25 Aug. 1790.
 8. T70/1563, Cape Coast Castle Governor and Council to Committee, 1 March 1791.
 9. Akinjogbin, “Archibald Dalzel”, 67. The quote is from a letter Dalzel wrote to his brother Andrew, who eventually became a professor of

- classics at the University of Edinburgh. Their long correspondence is preserved in the university library.
10. James A. Rawley, “Further light on Archibald Dalzel”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 17, no. 2 (1984), 318; Dalzel, *History*, 7.
 11. Akinjogbin, “Archibald Dalzel”, 71, 73; Rawley, “Further light”, 320.
 12. Akinjogbin, “Archibald Dalzel”, 72.
 13. *Ibid.*, 74.
 14. *Ibid.*, 73–4; Rawley, “Further light”, 320.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. *Ibid.*, 321.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. Thomas Clarkson, *History of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave trade by the British Parliament*, new ed. (London, 1839), 307, first published in London in 1808. The Middle Passage regulation bill passed. Clarkson called it “the first bill that ever put fetters upon that barbarous and destructive monster, the Slave Trade”. *Ibid.*, 316.
 19. Loren K. Waldman, “An unnoticed aspect of Archibald Dalzel’s *The History of Dahomey*”, *Journal of African History*, 6, no. 2 (1965), 188; Rawley, “Further light”, 321. Dalzel actually spelled Dahomey “Dahomy”.
 20. *Ibid.*, 323; Akinjogbin, “Archibald Dalzel”, 77.
 21. Waldman, “Unnoticed aspect”, 185, 191.
 22. Akinjogbin, “Archibald Dalzel”, 77–8.
 23. Dalzel, *History*, 18, 22 (of Fage’s introduction).
 24. Law, *Slave Coast*, 10, 7.
 25. ADM 1/1988, naval inspection report, 28 Feb. 1790.
 26. ADM 1/1714, naval inspection report, 15 March 1793.
 27. T70/1163, Day Book for all of 1794, 31 Dec. 1794.
 28. ADM 1/2131, naval inspection report, 15 Aug. 1795.
 29. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 182. All of his indictments of Abson are mentioned on that page.
 30. *Ibid.*, 184.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. *Ibid.*, 190.
 33. Hugh Thomas, *Slave trade*, 357. (He actually refers to Abson a second time, on p. 283, but calls him Alson.)
 34. T70/1163, Day Book for 1801, which reported payment of £448 10s to fort slaves that year.
 35. T70/35, E. William White to Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa, 5 May 1809. If Abson’s brother John was still alive, he would have been the likely heir.

7. THE FINAL YEARS

1. T70/1570, Abson to Dalzel, 14–22 Dec. 1794; Verger, *Trade relations*, 195–9.
2. *Ibid.*, 195.
3. France abolished the trade later in 1815 but the decree did not come into effect until 1826.
4. T70/1574, Abson to Dalzel, 27 Aug. 1797.
5. V.F. Pires, *Viagem de África em o reino de Dahomé* (São Paulo, 1957).
6. *Ibid.*, 86. Pires's reference to the woman as a "mulattress" might seem to support his notion that Ollivier de Montaguère was her father, but more likely she was the daughter of a previous staff member of the French fort. When the governor, called by Abson an "old fellow", paired with Sophie, she could well have been young enough to be his daughter.
7. Verger, *Trade relations*, 216 n. 72, citing AN, col. C6/27, written in January 1799; Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 187 n. 1. According to Akinjogbin, Adandozan was even younger, and regents were appointed until he was given full authority in 1804. *Dahomey*, 187.
8. Le Hérissé, *Ancien royaume*, 311–15, 318. Le Hérissé, a French colonial official who spent five years in Abomey, wrote down the oral history of Dahomey as related by a professional court chronicler named Agbidinokoun, a brother of Béhanzin, the last independent king.
9. Maximilien Quénun, *Au pays des Fons: us et coutumes du Dahomey*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1983), 25, first published in Paris in 1936.
10. Paul Hazoumé, *Le Pacte de sang au Dahomey* (Paris, 1956), 27 nn. 1 & 2, 28, 30.
11. Jérôme Félix de Monléon, "Le Cap des Palmes, le Dahomey, Fernando-Pô et l'île du Prince, en 1844", *Revue Coloniale*, 6, May 1845, 66.
12. Blaise Brue, "Voyage fait en 1843, dans le royaume de Dahomey, par M. Brue, agent du comptoir français établi à Whydah", *Revue Coloniale*, 7, Sept. 1845, 61.
13. Forbes, *Dahomey*, 2: 25, 2: 89.
14. Auguste Bouët, "Le Royaume de Dahomey", *L'Illustration*, 10, no. 491, July 24, 1852, 59 n. 1.
15. Édouard Foà, "Dahomiens et Egba", *La Nature*, no. 930, 28 March 1891, 262.
16. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 200, 186, 187. Akinjogbin's benevolent judgement of Adandozan seems to have been based on his sending two younger brothers to be educated in England, an initiative that failed; similarly unsuccessful efforts to have an ammunition factory and a min-

- ing industry installed in Dahomey, and what Akinjogbin called an “equally abortive attempt to lead Dahomey away from the slave trade to agriculture”. Elsewhere he admitted that Adandozan had no choice because during his reign all three European forts closed and England abolished the slave trade. *Ibid.*, 200, 193.
17. *Ibid.*, 200.
 18. Édouard Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey (royaumes d’Abomey, de Kétou et de Ouidah), *Études Dahoméennes*, 20, no. 2 (1957), 35.
 19. *Ibid.*, 51, and Cornevin, *République Populaire du Bénin*, 264. This would have made her about ten years old when she took charge.
 20. M’Leod, *Voyage*, 80–2.
 21. *Ibid.*, 9. The Circassians were a people of the northwestern Caucasus Mountains whose women were favoured by Ottoman sultans and Persian shahs. They scattered throughout the Middle East after a nineteenth-century war with Russia.
 22. *Ibid.*, 10, 12.
 23. T70/1580, J.E. James to Jacob Mould, Cape Coast Castle Governor, 28 June 1803.
 24. M’Leod, *Voyage*, 77.
 25. *Ibid.*, 82–3.
 26. *Ibid.*, 78.

8. THE AFTERMATH

1. *Ibid.*, 83–6.
2. T70/1580, James to Mould, 15 July 1803.
3. *Ibid.* Adandozan clearly did not want the English to leave. On 17 July a royal half-head relayed a request to James to “put the fort in Great Order [for] the Arrival of another Governor”, and two days later James was informed that the king had told the Yovogan “to Collect the Towns People for the Purpose of attending to the Repairs of the Fort”. T70/1163, Day Book for 1 July—31 Dec. 1803.
4. T70/1580, James to Mould, 2 Aug. 1803
5. T70/1580, Mould to James, 18 Aug. 1803.
6. T70/34, Mould to Committee, 8 Sept. 1803.
7. T70/72, Committee letters to Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa chairmen in Liverpool and Bristol, 23 Jan. 1804.
8. Law, *Ouidah*, 161–2; Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 193.
9. *Ibid.*, 190–1.
10. A word once widely used by Europeans in West Africa, in multiple spellings, that derived from Portuguese. It might be translated as nobles as well as chiefs.

11. The hammock was an Amerindian invention introduced to Africa by Europeans.
12. Dalzel, *History*, introduction, viii. See also M'Leod, *Voyage*, 35–6.
13. M'Leod noted that Europeans in general, unlike the king's own subjects, were admitted to his presence "without the least scruple; requiring from them only those marks of respect which they may think fit to perform, in the style of salutation they have been accustomed to in their own countries. They are allowed to be seated in his company, and he personally pays them great attention." Ibid., 55–6. Abson reported that in 1775 Kpengla did away with an outstanding Yovogan for allegedly "wearing sandals, and ordering a white man's umbrella to be carried over his head". The charges proved to be false. Dalzel, *History*, 158–9.
14. The range of his archival materials is particularly impressive. See *ibid.*, 221–4.
15. Surprisingly, the usually sagacious, discerning historian Robin Law accepts Akinjogbin's unsubstantiated view that Adandozan legitimately seized Abson's estate, including his children, "as was normal for a Dahomian chief". *Ouidah*, 107 and n. 226
16. Phillips, "Journal", 6: 226.
17. "Relation du royaume de Judas en Guinée, de son gouvernement, des mœurs de ses habitants, de leur religion, et du négoce qui s'y fait", no date or author, 89.
18. M'Leod, *Voyage*, 123–5.
19. Alpern, *Amazons*, 22–3.
20. *Mémoire de Bénin*, 58–9. Law, "Origins", 59–60.
21. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 190–1. He blames John Edward James for "not fully understand[ing] the situation" and "report[ing] Adandozan's 'tyrannical' measures to his superiors".
22. Burton, *Mission*, 1: 85. See also St Clair, *Grand slave emporium*, 163–4.
23. Ellis, *Ewe-speaking peoples*, 307.
24. Le Hérissé, *Ancien royaume*, 19.

9. ABSON'S CONTEMPORARIES

1. Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description*, 157–8. Translations from his French were made by the author.
2. Ibid., 164–5.
3. Ibid., 204.
4. Ibid., 206–8.
5. Ibid., 208.
6. Ibid., 209.

7. Ibid., 209–10.
8. Ibid., 213–14.
9. Ibid., 214.
10. Ibid., 214–15.
11. Ibid., 216.
12. His description of the slave trade seems overdrawn in places. For example, as noted in the Introduction, modern research indicates that about 14.5 per cent of slaves died on the Middle Passage, well below the impression Pruneau de Pommegorge gives. The whole point of trading slaves was to make money, and this required them to be alive and in reasonable health when they reached New World markets. Nevertheless, some 1,800,000 of them died at sea over three and a half centuries.
13. Regarding Royal African Company personnel, Davies (*Royal African Company*, 55) concluded delicately that “the general run of officers fell short ... in many of the qualities needed for success”.
14. David Henige, “Companies are always ungrateful: James Phipps of Cape Coast, a victim of the African trade”, *African Economic History*, 9 (1980), 27–47.
15. Ibid., 29.
16. Davies (“Living and dead,” 86) observes that “it was very rare for [any RAC soldier or tradesman] to be made an officer who had gone out in a lower rank, Illiteracy was probably the bar”.
17. Henige, “Companies”, 32, 43 n. 34.
18. Ibid., 31–2, 34 n. 37, 43 n. 34. Accra is only about 70 nautical miles from Cape Coast, which must have allowed Thomas to keep relatively close tabs on his protégé.
19. Ibid., 30.
20. Atkins, *Voyage*, 94. See the references to Elmina in the Rømer and Woortman sections below.
21. Henige, “Companies”, 38, 46 n. 91. The boy may have been about eight years old when Phipps died.
22. Ibid., 29. Atkins (*Voyage*, 90–8), who was present at the time, refers to him deferentially nine times as “the General”.
23. Ibid., 94. Unlike William’s Fort, Cape Coast Castle offered Anglican services.
24. Ibid., 94–5.
25. Ibid., 95.
26. Ibid., 94, 95–6.
27. Henige, “Companies”, 46 n. 82.
28. Ibid., 32.
29. Ibid., 37. 45–6 n. 71, 46 n. 75.
30. Ibid., 37, 46 n. 76.

31. Priestley, *West African trade*, 35, 73, 103, 112.
32. *Ibid.*, 94.
33. *Ibid.*, 47–8.
34. *Ibid.*, 35.
35. *Ibid.*, 46, 106.
36. *Ibid.*, 101–2. His authors included Joseph Addison, Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, Tobias Smollett and Jonathan Swift.
37. *Ibid.*, 102–3.
38. *Ibid.*, 95.
39. *Ibid.*, 117, 122–3, 182, 191.
40. *Ibid.*, 31–2.
41. *Ibid.*, 32–3.
42. *Ibid.*, 36. See Albert van Dantzig, *Forts and castles of Ghana* (Accra, 1980), 54, 59 and 60–1, for references to the Tantumkweri, Anomabu and Dixcove forts.
43. Priestley, *West African trade*, 37–8.
44. *Ibid.*, 37.
45. Albert van Dantzig and Barbara Priddy, *A short history of the forts and castles of Ghana* (Accra, 1971), 18, 24, 26, 41 (including a design of the fort), 47, 54, 57; St Clair, *Grand slave emporium*, 183–201; Wikipedia, “Fort William, Ghana”.
46. Priestley, *West African trade*, 44.
47. *Ibid.*, 13.
48. *Ibid.*, 39.
49. *Ibid.*, 45.
50. *Ibid.*, 14, 23, 86, 106–8.
51. *Ibid.*, 45–6, 102. The account comes from Smollett’s *History of England*, vol. 3, but can be found in Crooks, *Records*, 31–3.
52. L.F. Römer, *A reliable account of the coast of Guinea (1760)*, tr. and ed. Selena Axelrod Winsnes (Oxford, 2000), 63–4, 68–9. 95–7, 178–9 and 241.
53. Priestley, *West African trade*, 47–8, 68.
54. *Ibid.*, 89.
55. *Ibid.*, 49–50.
56. *Ibid.*, 53, 55.
57. *Ibid.*, 58–9, 61.
58. *Ibid.*, 59.
59. *Ibid.*, 51, 53–4, 61.
60. *Ibid.*, 57, 100.
61. *Ibid.*, 100–1.
62. *Ibid.*, 101–2.
63. *Ibid.*, 89–90.

64. Ibid., 77–8.
65. Palaver derived from the Portuguese *palavra*, meaning word or speech.
66. Ibid., 71. Nearly half a century later, Capt. John Adams described Anomabu's gold-takers. Some of them, he wrote, "are sagacious fellows, and keen observers, who soon find out the weak side of a man, and treat him accordingly". *Remarks*, 9–12. See Chapter 2 on Slave Coast merchants.
67. Priestley, *West African trade*, 60–4, 68.
68. Ibid., 83.
69. Ibid., 109. See also Margaret Priestley, "Philip Quaque of Cape Coast", in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa remembered: narratives by West Africans from the era of the slave trade* (Madison, 1967), 118–19 n. 46. Priestley's quotation brings to mind an outburst by Abson against King Kpengla cited in the Introduction.
70. Priestley, *West African trade*, 59–60, 69–70.
71. Ibid., 108, 122.
72. Ibid., 122–3.
73. Ibid., 123
74. Ibid.
75. This mini-biography is based on Nicholas Owen, *Journal of a slave-dealer: a view of some remarkable axcedents [accidents] in the life of Nics. Owen on the coast of Africa and America from the year 1746 to the year 1757*, ed. Eveline Martin (London, 1930). The journal actually ends in 1759.
76. In his diary Owen gave his first name as Nics, which is assumed to have meant Nicholas. Ibid., 73.
77. Ibid., 14, 60. Owen referred to his illnesses as "voilant favours", meaning violent fevers. Surprisingly, Martin ignored the colossal European death toll in West Africa during the slave-trade period, and blamed fevers on the climate rather than mosquitoes. Owen himself mentions the insect: "what most troubles is the musquetos, who hinders me from sleep at night". Ibid., 60.
78. Ibid., 18–19.
79. Ibid., 11.
80. Brew was a Protestant.
81. Ibid., 21, 63, 66, 80.
82. Ibid., 88.
83. Ibid., 13.
84. Ibid., 88.
85. Ibid., 79.
86. Ibid., 16–17.

87. Ibid., 85.
88. Ibid., 45.
89. Ibid., 5, 98.
90. Ibid., 8.
91. Ibid., 57–8.
92. Ibid., 9, 70.
93. Ibid., 9, 47–8.
94. Ibid., 6, 45, 73–4, 114–15.
95. Ibid., 9–10, 75.
96. Ibid., 10, 73.
97. Ibid., 10–11, 73, 116.
98. Ibid., 11, 91.
99. Ibid., 11.
100. Ibid., 10.
101. Ibid., 14, 61–2.
102. Ibid., 51.
103. Ibid., 52, 114. The stringed instrument was even called a “bangelo” by the locals.
104. Ibid., 49–50.
105. Ibid., 55–7, 71.
106. Ibid., 81, 90.
107. Ibid., 54–5, Chapter 5, n. 59.
108. Owen, *Journal*, 48–9.
109. Ibid., 48, 62. Owen later (on p. 71) reported a surprising burglary of his “store” and the loss of tobacco, rum and other commodities with a total value of 10 or 12 crowns (£2 10s or £3).
110. Ibid., 48.
111. Ibid., 102.
112. Ibid., 76.
113. Ibid., 70.
114. Ibid., 76.
115. Ibid., 85.
116. Ibid., 52.
117. Ibid., 53.
118. Ibid., 105.
119. Ibid., 106.
120. Ibid., 107.
121. Paul Erdman [sic] Isert, *Voyages en Guinée et dans les îles Caraïbes en Amérique*, ed. Nicoué Gayibor (Paris, 1989), 16.
122. See Dantzig, *Forts and castles*, 30–2.
123. Winsnes, *Letters*, 17.
124. Winsnes, *Letters*, 6–7. All that might account for Isert’s refusal to

give Abson, his Ouidah host, any credit. It's not clear why he joined Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture and fertility, with Venus and Bacchus as European icons. His mention of "one's own resources" referred, in his case, to a collection of plant specimens he had made which is still preserved in Copenhagen's Botanical Museum.

125. *Ibid.*, 175.

126. *Ibid.*, 177.

127. *Ibid.*, 177–8.

128. *Ibid.*, 178–82.

129. *Ibid.*, 182.

130. *Ibid.*, 187–9.

131. *Ibid.*, 4.

132. *Ibid.*, 190.

133. *Ibid.*, 4.

134. *Ibid.*, 4–5, 166, 163.

135. *Ibid.*, 5.

136. *Ibid.*, 228–9.

137. *Ibid.*, 231.

138. Nørregård, *Danish settlements*, 175. See pp. 172–85 for a recounting of the Danish plantations.

139. Winsnes, *Letters*, 231.

140. *Ibid.*, 228–9.

140. *Ibid.*, 5.

141. Rømer, *Reliable account*, xiii.

142. *Ibid.*, xxi, xxii. Georg Nørregård, author of the first book on Danish activities in West Africa to be translated into English, *Danish settlements in West Africa, 1658–1850* (Boston, 1966), first cited in the Introduction, is even more critical. He calls Rømer's 1760 book "absolutely unreliable" but immediately weakens his case with a dubious report that Rømer married a tribal prince (see his p. 106), and hardly mentions Rømer's decade on the Gold Coast. Moreover, in his bibliography, he wrongly dates Rømer's book to 1750 and lists the 1758 German translation of the 1756 Danish booklet rather than the original. Nørregård wounds himself even further by praising a Lutheran bishop's preface to the 1760 book that justified the slave trade as a way to teach Christianity to Africans and make their lives far less miserable (see pp. 7–9 of *Reliable account*).

143. Rømer, *Reliable account*, xxii–xxiii, xviii.

144. *Ibid.*, xxii–xxiv.

145. Nørregård maintains (*Danish settlements*, 105) that "he was too strict, would use abusive language [against his assistants] and box their ears, reduce their salaries, and was constantly suspicious". Rømer summed

- up Billsen (*Reliable account*, 76) as “a man who thought Guinea and all the Danes were created just for his own sake”.
146. Ibid., xiv, 255–60; Nørregård, *Danish settlements*, 105.
 147. Rømer, *Reliable account*, xiv.
 148. Ibid., xx, 232.
 149. Ibid., xiv–xv.
 150. Ibid., xv.
 151. Ibid., 217–18, 61.
 152. Ibid., xv.
 153. Ibid., xxvi.
 154. Ibid., 234.
 155. Ibid., 234 n. 148; Winsnes, *Letters*, 157.
 156. Rømer, *Reliable account*, 185 and n. 238.
 157. Ibid., 185 and n. 237.
 158. Ibid., 186–7.
 159. Ibid., 79. In 80 n. 8, Winsnes observes that six authors before Rømer, starting with Pieter de Marees in 1602, cited African belief in a single Creator, but Ludewig seems to have summed it up better than most.
 160. Ibid., 80.
 161. Ibid. Winsnes says the word Rømer translated as devil now means ghost.
 162. Ibid., 80–3.
 163. Ibid., 85 and n. 27. Winsnes suggests parables meant proverbs and other non-specific statements.
 164. Ibid., 87–8.
 165. Ibid., 182–3, 231.
 166. Ibid., 107.
 167. Ibid., 114.
 168. Ibid., 99. In n. 70, Winsnes says she could find no other references to a chicken heart as a head ornament, and thinks Rømer may have confused it with another event. But she confirms a Gã connection of the chicken with weekly birthdays.
 169. Ibid., 100; Isert, referring to the same males, wrote that there was “no particular time stipulated when they must be circumcised, but normally it happens between the sixth and tenth years”. Winsnes, *Letters*, 131.
 170. Ibid., 131.
 171. Rømer, *Reliable account*, 232–3.
 172. Woortman was outlasted by Adrian Jacobs, the very first director-general, who served for 14 years from 1624 to 1638. Michel R. Doortmont and Jinna Smit, *Sources for the mutual history of Ghana*

- and the Netherlands: an annotated guide to the Dutch archives relating to Ghana and West Africa in the Nationaal Archief, 1593–1960s* (Leiden and Boston, 2007), 260–1.
173. *Ibid.*, 294; Michel R. Doortmont, “Controlling the Dutch Gold Coast trade: the Woortman-Plange family group”, Groningen, 2007–2016, draft chapter 5 of eventual book text. Doortmont, Natalie Everts and Jean-Jacques Vrij, “Tussen de Goudkost, Nederland en Suriname: de Euro-Afrikaanse families Van Bakergem, Woortman, Rühle en Huydecoper. III. Woortman”, *De Nederlandsche Leeuw. Tijdschrift van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Genootschap voor Geslacht-en Wapenkunde*, 117, no. 7–8 (2000), 310–44.
 174. The Dutch captured the castle in 1637, named it St George d’Elmina, and completely drove the Portuguese out of the Gold Coast by 1642. The castle became the WIC’s West African headquarters. See Dantzig, *Forts and castles*, 4.
 175. Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans in West Africa*, 36.
 176. Harvey M. Feinberg, “Director generals of the Netherlands West India Company: an accurate list for the eighteenth century”, in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 130, no. 2/3 (1974), 309–12. Feinberg wrote that 16 of 34 (47 per cent) died in office and 3 died shortly after retiring, but his list names 38 men along with the 19 deaths.
 177. Brew actually became a business associate of the Woortmans and a personal friend of Jan. Doortmont, “Controlling”, 10.
 178. See Dantzig, *Forts and castles*, 44–6.
 179. *Ibid.*, 4.
 180. *Ibid.*
 181. *Ibid.*
 182. Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans*, 35, 41.
 183. *Ibid.*, 31–2. Feinberg also emphasized the peace goal in “Elmina, Ghana: a history of its development and relationship with the Dutch in the eighteenth century”, Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1969, 41, 156–7. Some Africanists might challenge it on grounds that conflict between Africans produced more slaves for export.
 184. Doortmont, “Controlling”, 32.
 185. According to Feinberg, the WIC stationed a garrison of 70 to 100 men in Elmina during the eighteenth century (*Africans and Europeans*, 35) and usually had about 300 slaves there in the same period (“Elmina”, 36). Elmina was probably the Gold Coast’s leading trade centre for most of three centuries.
 186. *Ibid.*, 6, 7.
 187. *Ibid.*, 8.
 188. *Ibid.*, 1.

189. Ibid., 10.
190. Ibid., 13–14.
191. Ibid., 5–6, 14–15.
192. Ibid., 17–18.
193. Ibid.
194. Ibid., 18.
195. Ibid., 32.
196. Ibid.
197. Ibid., 19.
198. Ibid.
199. Ibid., 19–20.
200. Ibid., 22.
201. Ibid., 24–6.
202. Ibid., 29, 27.
203. Ibid., 30.
204. Ibid., 28.
205. Ibid., 31.
206. James F. Searing, *West African slavery and Atlantic commerce: the Senegal River valley, 1700–1860* (Cambridge, 2003), 55, 99.
207. George E. Brooks, *Eurafricans in western Africa: commerce, social status, gender, and religious observance from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century* (Athens, OH, and Oxford, 2003), 206.
208. John Lindsay, *A voyage to the coast of Africa, in 1758 ...* (London, 1759), 77–9, reprinted in Delhi in 2016. See also George E. Brooks, Jr., “The *Signares* of Saint-Louis and Gorée: women entrepreneurs in eighteenth-century Senegal”, in Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, eds., *Women in Africa: studies in social and economic change* (Stanford, 1976), 26.
209. Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description*, 3–5. See also Brooks, “*Signares*”, 23–4, for a slightly different translation.
210. Ibid., 23–5.
211. Searing, *West African slavery*, 93–4.; see also 107–8, 142–3. Searing relied on a translation of Adanson’s 1757 book, *Histoire naturelle du Sénégal, coquillages, avec la relation abrégée d’un voyage fait en ce pays, pendant les années 1749, 50, 51, 52, & 53* (Paris) in John Pinkerton’s *A general collection of the best and most interesting voyages and travels in all parts of the world*, vol. 16 (London, 1814), 598–674.
212. Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic slave trade*, tr. Ayi Kwei Armah (Cambridge, 1988), 76.
213. Ibid.; Hilary Jones, *The métis of Senegal: urban life and politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2013), 30.
214. Searing, *West African slavery*, 108.
215. Ibid., 94–7.

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